



NOVEL

5

I'M THE **EVIL LORD** OF AN
**INTERGALACTIC
EMPIRE**

WRITTEN BY
Yomu Mishima
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Nadare Takamine



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**"It's cute how
you act all
bad, Liam!"**



"You don't care if they mock me, Amagi?"



"You guys
seem like
you're having
fun. You got
room for me?"

"Lord...
Li...am..."



“They raised
their hands
against me,
and that’s
the reason
they’re
dying.”

LILLIE

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VANADIS

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EMPIRE**

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WRITTEN BY

YOMU MISHIMA

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

ON THE CAPITAL PLANET—encased in its metal sphere at the center of the Algrand Empire—I, Liam Sera Banfield, sat with my friends at the bar of an illustrious, high-class hotel.

From the dimly lit bar, I could see the night sky. Well, the night sky as projected on the glass that made up one whole wall of the room, which was obscuring the actual view around the building. At night, there was too much ambient light on the Capital Planet.

We sat in a row at an opulent counter. I looked down at my hand, which held a glass of alcohol, but when I tipped the glass it didn't spill out. I swirled my drink, mixing its contents, and the liquid promptly changed colors. How strange.

Watching this, I quietly said to my gathered friends, "It's been a while since we've all been together like this."

The bar was empty except for us, with classical music playing in the background. With me were the friends I'd known since my days at primary school.

To my left was my fiancée, Rosetta Sereh Claudia. With her blonde hair and blue eyes, she had the look of a haughty noble girl, but she was actually quite sincere and reserved. It was a hell of a mismatch. At first, she was a stubborn girl with a steel will, unwilling to yield to authority or wealth. I took a liking to her and forced her into an engagement with me. I planned to use every means at my disposal to bend her to my will, looking forward to enjoying the humiliation I expected her to feel. But now, for some reason Rosetta was in love with me and totally devoted. All traces of that strong woman with the steel will were gone. It was really a bummer.

"I suppose so," she said. "The three of us have plenty of opportunities to meet, however."

Rosetta's regretful gaze was directed at the blond nobleman to my right, Kurt Sera Exner. The tall, handsome young man wore a gray suit, looking a bit more grown-up these days. Unlike the rest of us who had attended the military

academy together until recently, Kurt had been going to an Imperial university. After that, he had fulfilled his required term as a government official, and now would head off to the military academy himself.

He seemed a little sad but was still smiling. “We can’t do anything about that. My family has a lot of connections to the military. It was more convenient for me to get university out of the way first.”

There were those nobles who had strong connections to the military, and others with ties to the government. My own House Banfield had neither. We were just an unaffiliated family out in the sticks, but for a military family like Kurt’s, their offspring finished their education in the military academy because afterward they’d go straight on to join the army. Nobles like me, who weren’t tied to a specific path, were free in that regard.

To Kurt’s right sat the casually dressed Eila Sera Berman, with her reddish-brown hair. I had known her since our days training under Viscount Razel. All nobles had to spend time learning the ways of the world at another noble house, and that was where I’d met Kurt too. I’d known them both for longer than I’d known Rosetta.

“It’s too bad,” said Eila. “You shouldn’t have gone straight to the military academy, Liam. If you’d gone to university with Kurt, I would have gone with you.”

I drained the alcohol in my glass. “I like to save the best for last.”

“Sure you do. You had plenty of fun in the military, didn’t you? All alone with Wallace, leaving me in logistics on the Capital Planet.”

Apparently, Eila resented that I left her behind to do desk work since I didn’t want to put her in danger. She glared at Wallace, who sat to her right.

The blue-haired, shallow-looking Wallace Noah Albareto was royalty, but you wouldn’t know it by looking at him. He previously had a small claim to succession, but he gave it up in order to become independent (with my backing). Basically, he was a frivolous, unreliable guy.

Wallace said, “You were lucky not having to be on that patrol fleet. Liam worked me to the bone practically every day up there!”

“Wallace, I’m begging you, please don’t tell me about what you did with Liam. It’ll taint my fantas—I mean, my memories.”

“*You’re* the one tainting things.”

I had no idea what they were talking about, but I knew that the two of them never got along. Perhaps they were actually closer than I thought? Anyway, Eila and Wallace’s conversation was heating up and the rest of us couldn’t join in, so I turned to Kurt instead.

“I’ll put in a good word for you at the academy.” I’d bribed ‘em—I mean, *made donations*—plenty, so I was certain they’d make a friend of mine comfortable there. But Kurt, who was always weirdly straitlaced, just thanked me and turned down my offer.

“Thanks, but I’m good. House Exner is plenty connected. I’m sure everything will go well.”

“Oh yeah, with your dad having been an ace fighter and all.”

House Exner was new to the nobility. The head of the family, Baron Exner, had piloted a mobile knight in the military and was made a noble for all his great achievements. His fellow knights and soldiers looked up to him as a beacon of hope. As his son, Kurt was unlikely to face too many difficulties.

“You’re as uptight as always,” I told him.

“And you’re as crude a talker as ever, Liam.”

As a rule, evil lords shouldn’t take crap from anybody, but Kurt was a good friend, not to mention being heir to another family of evil lords. Baron Exner had been admired in the military, but as a noble, he was the kind of vile man who took everything he could from his subjects. He acted like a hero, but it was all just a facade. Inside, he was a villain like me, and that was what I liked about him. I felt a sense of kinship with the man and wanted to stay close to his heir, so I allowed Kurt a few jabs here and there.

“Anyway, how much fun did you have in college?” I asked him.

“Huh? Well, enough, I guess.”

I sighed at Kurt playing dumb. What I wanted to know about was women. “I’m

talking about *girls*, stupid. I'm sure there were plenty who were interested in you. What I want to know is if you made a move on any of them."

Kurt looked a little uncomfortable from my grilling. On Kurt's other side, Eila's ears seemed to perk up curiously, and on my left, Rosetta had blushed deeply at my mention of "making moves." *Aren't you a little too innocent for how flashy you look, Rosetta?*

Even Wallace joined the conversation about Kurt's love life. "I'm curious too. I heard there was a little war between the ladies at your workplace over who got to be your secretary. You must have been with at least a couple, right? Introduce me to some of them! Oh, but I'd only like those you haven't already sampled, please."

Wallace just wanted to take advantage of Kurt's popularity, but Kurt shook his head.

"I have no intention of fooling around when I'm not in a position to follow up responsibly." He didn't seem to be lying about that either.

Wallace was shocked. "Are you crazy? Your college years are supposed to be the best of your life, and you wasted them worrying about being *responsible*?"

I asked Wallace if he really thought his life would peak in college. This time, Eila joined in, sounding impressed with Kurt.

"Kurt's right. You're a loser compared to him, Wallace. What are you even going to college for? I think you should go back to the military academy."

"You're always so hostile toward me."

Eila ignored Wallace's protests, giving *me* a disgusted look this time. Guess she didn't like what I asked Kurt. "You shouldn't cut loose too much in college either, Liam."

I gave Eila a teasing smile. "Women are just disposable to me."

"It really pisses me off to *hear* that from you, but it doesn't sound convincing at all, Liam. I think you're just bluffing," she said, scolding me with a straight face.

My face twitched. "B-bluffing? How dare you."

Wallace nodded a few times, evidently agreeing with Eila. “What do you expect? You’ve never actually made a move on a girl yourself, have you, Liam? And you’ve got all those beautiful women around you all the time too.”

Beautiful women? Did he mean Tia and Marie? If so, Wallace had no taste in ladies at all. “I don’t even consider them members of the opposite sex,” I stated, and for some reason Kurt laughed at me.

“That’s just like you, Liam.”

“Now you’re making fun of me too? Just so you know, I have Amagi, all right?” After I said that, all four of them gave me a strange look.

Wallace seemed to choose his words carefully so as to not upset me. “Liam, we all know Amagi is important to you, but you understand how that sounds to other people, right? I think it’s safer not to mention her in public so much.”

The Empire had a thing against androids like my personal maid, Amagi. It made no sense to me, but if I walked around with her, people would laugh at me. Sulking, I chugged some more alcohol.

Rosetta then piped up, sounding worried. “You care for her a lot, don’t you, Darling?”

“That’s right.”

Watching the two of us, Kurt chuckled. “But Amagi and Rosetta still make only two. I can’t even imagine you fooling around with girls, Liam.”

Damn you! He sounded really amused now. I was getting pissed, since it seemed like they were all calling me a loser.

“Oh, shut up! I can fool around with whoever I want! I’ll show you guys!”

I boldly proclaimed my intent to fool around, but my back was to Rosetta so I couldn’t see how she was reacting.

Eila and Wallace stared at me, then exchanged an exasperated look.

“What do you think, Wallace?”

“Liam says he’ll fool around, but he won’t. I’ll bet a month’s allowance on it.”

“Aren’t you embarrassed to be betting your *allowance*? We can’t bet anyway.

I don't think he'll do it either."

The two of them were convinced I was incapable of being a ladies' man, which just made me even more motivated.

"You guys mock me too much. If I was serious, I could get with however many girls I wanted. Next time we hang out, I'll have proof!"

I grabbed another glass from the bartender and drank some more. I didn't care for the way Eila and Wallace were smirking at me. Only Kurt was left with a solemn look now.

"What's up?" I asked, curious. "Drunk already?"

His face had gone red. "N-no, I'm fine. Let's have another. We won't see each other for a while again after this," he said, before finishing off his current drink.

Every so often Kurt got this look on his face like he was brooding about something. I wondered if something had happened that he wasn't telling us about. I was starting to get a bit worried about him when suddenly he checked his tablet.

"Sorry, I gotta step out for a minute," he said, getting up.

Eila got up after him. "I've had enough to drink for a bit. I'm gonna take a break."

"Bathroom?" Wallace teased, sipping at his drink.

In response, Eila gave him a coolly indifferent look, not angry or embarrassed in the least. It was more like how you'd look at a piece of trash on the ground.

Wallace averted his eyes. "Sorry."

With Kurt and Eila having left the counter, it was just the three of us, so I changed the subject. "Kurt sure doesn't seem to be enjoying himself."

Wallace just cocked his head. Apparently, he hadn't noticed.

"He looked like he was having fun to me, but..."

Unlike Wallace, Rosetta had actually noticed Kurt's face clouding over occasionally. "He did seem upset about something a few times. I wonder if something happened."

While Rosetta and I worried, Wallace just sipped his drink. “Well, Kurt’s family is new to nobility. No matter how talented and well-liked he is, it doesn’t change the fact that they’re low-ranked. I’m sure there’s been jealousy at both school and work.”

“Jealousy” made me instantly think “bullying.” Many nobles didn’t accept families with a short history. Even if Kurt was talented—no, *because* he was talented—he probably annoyed a lot of those around him. Maybe he hadn’t done well at school on his own, away from the presence of his friends.

Rosetta was clearly worried about him too. “I hope he’s all right.”

Even Wallace, who usually couldn’t be relied on for anything, spared some thought for Kurt. “Yeah, he’s the type to bottle it up if he’s going through something. If he’s finding ways to let out his stress he’ll be fine, but if he lets it build up until it explodes, that’s not gonna be good.”

True, Kurt did tend to keep quiet when he was troubled, not wanting anyone around him to pick up on it. He certainly hadn’t confided in us today. It was actually starting to kind of piss me off.

“If he’d just told me whatever it was, I would have shut up anyone giving him a hard time.” I started to think about looking into things later on and dealing out some justice of my own, but Rosetta gave me a look. “What?”

“You’re so sweet, Darling.”

“Huh? Are you stupid or something?”

Really, she doesn’t understand anything. How does she think I’d shut up any idiots bullying Kurt? I’d use my authority, my wealth, and violence, of course. Nobody who helps their friend in any way that’d be “sweet.”

“Well, you’re just so worried about your friend.” Rosetta smiled at me warmly. Yeah, that only confirmed for me that she was, in fact, stupid.

“You’re really a terrible judge of character, you know that?” I asked.

Wallace turned to me. “So, what are you planning on doing?”

“I’ll make another little donation to the military academy. If I ask them to look after Kurt, I’m sure nothing too bad will happen to him.”

“That’s a good idea. I don’t think we have to worry about it with Kurt, but a lot of nobles ruin themselves using drugs, you know.”

“Drugs?”

“Yeah. On the black market, there are some really powerful illegal ones that can mess you up, even if you’ve undergone physical strengthening.”

This world I’d been reborn into had highly addictive illegal substances of its own, some of which could even destroy the body of a super-strong knight.

“Kurt wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“I mean, they *do* say the serious types are more susceptible. I think guys like Kurt who keep it all bottled up are probably more at risk.”

Listening to Wallace was making me a little nervous, but I really did think Kurt would be okay. Either way, I decided to keep an eye on him in my own way.

On the Algrand Empire’s Capital Planet, a planet surrounded by a protective metal shell, everything was managed by human hands. The climate and weather could be controlled at will, so it was a perfect place to live where there were no such things as natural disasters.

However, comfortable as it was, the Capital Planet did have its problems too. For one, there was its population, as people flooded in every day to have a taste of that comfortable existence. Many of these immigrants sneaked in illegally, and this was a source of great stress for the planet’s administrators.

The planet had a sizable underground population too, consisting of those too poor and needy to dwell comfortably on the surface. That secret side of the Capital Planet was known by several names: the slums, the trash heap, the underground.

The underground’s floors, walls, and ceiling were all covered in rusted metal, and its wide central pathway was lined with street stalls on either side. So many people moved through this area that it felt incredibly cramped, and the air was stagnant and foul-smelling.

Normally, people who lived on the surface never ventured down there, but on

this day, an out-of-place visitor was there. Something clearly set this man apart from those who belonged here, and the residents sneaked looks at him. The man paid them no mind however and headed straight for his destination.

The man came to a narrow alleyway that branched off from the main thoroughfare. It quickly led to a dead end, but a fortune teller had her business there. The woman wore a hooded, deep blue robe, and her neck and arms were adorned in gold and silver jewelry.

The man stopped in front of her.

“Welcome,” she said. “So, it seems you’ve made up your mind.” The fortune teller’s eyes were hidden, but her skin was pale, and her bright red lipstick stood out against it. She smiled and placed a small glass bottle containing a pink liquid on the table in front of her. When the man hesitated to touch it, she tapped the bottle with her finger a few times to encourage him. “You seem awfully uncertain, considering that you came all this way to get here...Lord Kurt.”

The man’s name was indeed Kurt—Kurt Sera Exner. The handsome young man with blond hair and purple eyes stared down at the bottle on the table.

“Are you scared?” the woman teased. “It’s fine. It’s not sanctioned by the government, but it doesn’t have adverse effects. No one will find out you’ve used it.”

“N-no, I...”

“Just try it once and all your worries will fly away. Though you might fly past the point of no return before you even use it though. Hee hee hee.”

Kurt deliberated before the woman selling the suspicious drug. She must have decided he still had his doubts, so she picked up the bottle and removed it from sight.

“We can just pretend this never happened, then.”

When she did that, a desperate look came over Kurt’s face. He slammed his hand against the table. He had made his decision.

His voice sounded tortured. “—me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sell it to me.”

The woman smiled ominously. “Just so you know, you might never be able to go back to your former life.”

“I’m prepared for that.” Electronic money would leave a purchase history, so Kurt removed several bars of precious metal from his pocket.

The woman took the material and appraised it with a device hidden inside one of the pieces of jewelry on her arm. “Real enough. Well then, here you go.”

Kurt took the bottle of pink liquid, looking slightly regretful.

The woman decided to give him some more encouragement. “There’s no need for worry. Everyone’s doing something like this. There’s nothing unusual about it.”

“B-but, I...”

“Just be honest with yourself. You’re curious, aren’t you?”

Kurt turned his back on the woman and began walking away.

The woman watched him go and chuckled to herself. “Yes, indeed...this could be goodbye forever to your old life.”

A few weeks after my first night out drinking with my friends in a while...

“I’m so proud of you for starting school at an Imperial university, Master Liam, I don’t know when I’ll be able to stop crying!”

On the monitor projected in front of me was my sobbing butler, Brian. While I lived on the Capital Planet, we would chat over a long-range communication system.

I sat on my couch in a casual outfit, watching him weep. “First thing in the morning and you’re already so noisy. How many times have we talked about this? I’ve had the entrance ceremony, and now here I am in school. How long are you going to blubber about it?”

Why was my butler always crying? Was this guy all right? I worried about him

a lot, but at the same time, he was actually pretty talented. He did a decent job of managing my mansion, so it wasn't like I could easily fire him.

“But it’s so wonderful! You successfully graduated from the military academy, and now all you have left to do is study at the university and complete your term working as an official! Then after that, you’ll return to your domain and supervise development here.”

There was still plenty of time before my lecture, so I was enjoying a lazy morning, drinking the tea Amagi had prepared for me and entertaining that worrywart, Brian. He was becoming tiresome, however, so I changed the subject.

“Everything’s fine back at home, right?”

Brian nodded excitedly. *“All is well! Progress is being made even while you’re away for your training, Master Liam. The details are in these documents.”*

Digital data was displayed in the air in front of me. I looked it over and smirked. “These numbers aren’t bad, and I’m sure they’ll be better by the time I’m back.”

As an evil lord, it was very important for me to build up my strength. The more developed my domain became, the more power I wielded. Even my subjects were resources—just another part of my financial might. I was definitely villainous to look at things this way.

“Your subjects all eagerly await your return, Master Liam!”

“Pitiful, the lot of them.”

Ignorant as they were, my subjects loved me. How foolish to look forward to the return of their evil lord!

I, Liam Sera Banfield, had reincarnated into this fantasy world, and I was doing well on my way to achieve my goal of becoming an evil lord. In my past life, I’d learned the hard way how pointless it was to do good, so I had decided to live this fresh life concerned only with my own happiness. For that purpose, I was developing my territory even while I was away from it, all so that when I returned, I’d be able to reap the rewards of my subjects’ efforts. I was already looking forward to it.

While I sat drinking my tea with a satisfied smile on my face, Brian butted in again, completely ruining my mood. *“By the way... Master Liam, when will you officially recognize Miss Eulisia as a concubine?”*

“Pfft! Wh-what?”

Eulisia Morisille was a former saleslady from the Third Weapons Factory. She was also an oddball who had strangely returned to the military academy, reeducated herself, and joined the special forces. A lot of things had happened after that, and now she acted as my adjutant—my liaison to the Imperial Army.

The reason she’d originally become my adjutant, however, was rather disgraceful. She’d apparently joined the special forces just to get back at me for giving her the cold shoulder in the past. Her revenge plan was to make me fall for her and confess my love before rejecting me. Naturally that scheme had failed and instead she’d broken down in front of me, coming clean about all of it. I felt sorry for her at the time, so I gave her a fake little love confession, thinking she could at least convince herself she’d had her revenge. However, it was at *that* point the chick realized she’d be better off to accept my insincere offer and become my mistress rather than reject me.

I was taking care of her for now, but what a horrible woman. Eulisia was extremely capable due to her military training, but a total waste otherwise. I had no intention of actually treating her as my mistress, but the perception was that I had “confessed my love” to her and pulled her out of the military for my own personal use.

Thus, I found myself in a terribly awkward situation.

“Am I wrong, Master Liam? Did you not steal her from the military to make her your concubine?”

I turned around and looked at Amagi, who had begun cleaning up the tea I’d spewed from my mouth a moment ago. “A-Amagi! Explain the situation, would you? It’s all a misunderstanding!”

Amagi looked right at me and smiled. Her smile scared me a bit, and I didn’t think it was just my imagination. It felt as though I was turning to my wife and telling her, *“You’re wrong about my relationship with that woman!”*

“I do not see the problem,” my android maid replied. “In the first place, have you not often said you plan to have a harem? Yet you have still not bedded a single woman.”

“I have you, don’t I?”

“As I have said before, I do not count.”

“Yeah, you do!”

“I do not. Therefore, you are still pure, Master.”

“I’m still...pure?”

Amagi just continued smiling at me while I awakened to the shocking truth. *That means...in this life, I’m still a virgin?* No wonder my four friends had laughed at me for proclaiming so boldly my intent to fool around with women.

While I sat there stunned, Brian pressed the issue. *“I realize you’re engaged to Lady Rosetta, but at present House Banfield is still without an heir. It may seem a tad improper, but your duty as a noble demands that you produce an heir as soon as possible.”*

It pissed me off hearing that I should have an heir with a mistress when I already had a fiancée.

“Shut up! You think I’d have a kid with a mistress for a reason like that?”

I thought I was being reasonable, but Brian argued back, getting pretty heated himself. *“A reason like what? If anything happens to you, Master Liam, House Banfield is doomed! That’s not a good enough reason for you? My concern is legitimate! Why do you refuse to be intimate with a flesh-and-blood woman?”*

Brian was seriously angry at me, and I had no comeback. I wanted to live my life freely and not take orders from anyone, but in the face of Brian’s genuine concern I couldn’t honestly say I felt no guilt.

“I-I’ll think about it, so for now just drop it.”

“You always dodge the issue like this! Master Liam, I cannot sleep at night, I’m so worried! Not to mention, at the Imperial university you may get mixed up with someone who has ill intentions—”

I'd had it with Brian's nagging and ended the call. I wiped the sweat from my forehead. "I have to choose my harem carefully. I won't let Eulisia into it just because I need an heir."

That's right. My harem is only going to be made up of the best candidates. I'm not letting a mess like Eulisia in just 'cause she's a bit cute.

Amagi made me another cup of tea. "Perhaps you could have discussed those details while the call was still connected."



“I-I guess so.” I couldn’t take Amagi staring at me any longer, so I drained my cup in one gulp and stood up. “I’m going to school now.”

Amagi bowed her head. “Very well. I will have the car brought around.”

Why do I have to deal with my butler nagging me first thing in the morning? And he’s not mad even about me wanting to have a harem—he’s mad that I don’t have one yet!

I couldn’t understand it. A decent butler should caution his master against fooling around with multiple women and encourage only good behavior! Why the hell was I getting scolded for *not* fooling around?

“Since it’s come to this, should I just pick up a few chicks at school?”

As I started planning how to shut up Brian, Amagi, and my friends, I realized something. Why should I have to be goaded into fooling around? I swore not to hold back in my second life. I should be out doing whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. I was starting to feel disgusted with myself for my lack of nerve all this time.

“Amagi, call Wallace.”

“Lord Wallace? He is not awake yet.”

“What?” I asked.

“He did not return until this morning, so he is still asleep at present.”

So he’s not only messing around without letting me know, but he’s even staying out all night?!

“Well, wake him up!”

I’ll get Wallace to set up a mixer, and then I’ll go fool around with girls every day and piss Rosetta off. I’ll make her regret getting engaged to a man like me! I’m an evil lord, after all! Why should I care about her feelings?

Liam’s fiancée, Rosetta Sereh Claudia, walked on the grounds of the academy with a few female friends. She was dressed in casual clothes—a baggy tunic and skinny pants—but the outfit did nothing to hide the swell of her chest and her

attractive figure. She wore her voluminous blonde hair in her trademark ringlets, and her sharp blue eyes might've given others the impression she was cold.

Accompanied by her hangers-on, to an observer, Rosetta probably looked like a flashy rich girl in the company of groupies. That wasn't necessarily untrue—as the fiancée of Count Banfield, she was on another level entirely from a regular rich girl.

When a group of haughty noble girls noticed Rosetta coming, they made a path for her. Rosetta gave off the air of a queen, but on the inside she was fed up with all this. She glanced at those around her. Young people from all sorts of planets were nearby, each one unique. Some students looked so showy that Rosetta and her followers appeared plain in comparison. It practically looked like there was a costume contest or culture festival going on all the time, but this sort of dress was normal for an Imperial university.

Rosetta's hangers-on were a group of girls from House Banfield's territory, mostly from vassal families. Basically, they were the daughters of Liam's lackeys, who had been admitted to the school at the same time as Rosetta to serve as her companions. It wasn't unusual for a major noble to go to school with a group of followers, and there were plenty of similar groups here.

Rosetta's followers were thrilled at the environment they found themselves in.

"Let's use the common cafeteria every once in a while, Lady Rosetta," suggested one of the girls, who in particular had gained a little sophistication since starting college.

Another girl, diligent-looking and wearing glasses, glared at the first. "You want to make Lady Rosetta use the common cafeteria?"

The common cafeteria served hearty lunches for cheap prices, thus being very popular with students who came from common backgrounds. The cafeteria was crowded at lunch time, so students of more affluent origins tended to have lunch at the pricier restaurants located on campus.

The newly sophisticated girl puffed out her cheeks indignantly. "Well, it gets boring eating at the same place all the time, doesn't it? Since we've come from

so far away, we should mingle with all different types of people, shouldn't we?"

"Would you listen to yourself?" the girl with glasses huffed, but the others in the group agreed with the first girl's suggestion.

Rosetta knew the girls were enjoying themselves here, so she decided to go along with the idea too. "The common cafeteria doesn't sound bad every once in a while. We can have lunch there today."

The girls were delighted that Rosetta had agreed. Well, except for the one with glasses, who just gaped at her in shock. In a whisper, she informed Rosetta of the other girls' intentions. "Are you sure? You know it's not lunch they're after."

The girls had another reason for wanting to have lunch somewhere different. Since so many students used the common cafeteria, it was a good place to meet new people.

Rosetta hadn't been fooled. "I'm aware of that."

Frankly, people often went to the common cafeteria to hook up. If you noticed someone there you were attracted to, it was expected you'd pursue them. Nobles sometimes hid their identities and went to the cafeteria in search of fun. Since this was considered a normal way to enjoy your time as a student, Rosetta's groupies likely wanted to find some boys to have fun with too.

The girl with glasses shot a disgusted look at the others. "And you're okay with that?"

To Rosetta, this girl was being overly serious. "As long as they don't overdo it, it's fine. It's not like they're spoken for. They don't have to worry about hurting anyone."

If only this girl could lighten up a bit, she thought.

The newly sophisticated girl was perhaps too casual about it, but the girl with glasses wasn't casual enough. She continued to argue, still not sounding convinced. "B-but premarital sex will still get them in trouble!"

Many people those days were still concerned about premarital sex, and on some planets, it remained a serious offense. However, Rosetta wasn't worried

about it.

“It’s not so uncommon now, is it? I hear many people find their future partner in college. I won’t get in the way of anyone looking for a serious relationship.”

Her groupies had come to the big city from the countryside, so to speak, and were excited by the change in scenery. Rosetta had her share of worries, but she knew that if she restricted these girls too much, they’d resent her. Besides, she saw this as a good opportunity.

I need to see what these girls are really like.

She wouldn’t get in their way, though she would make them take responsibility if things went too far. Anyway, there was something Rosetta was more concerned about than how her followers chose to spend their time, and that was Liam.

Darling, do you truly intend to fool around?

Liam had openly declared his intent at the hotel bar. Remembering that, Rosetta put a clenched fist to her chest. It made her heart hurt to imagine Liam being with another woman, and yet she wasn’t even in a position to protest.

Considering his position, he should have a lot more women around him. You need to accept that, Rosetta. It was only natural for Liam to fool around, she tried to tell herself.

Rosetta followed her groupies to the common cafeteria. Unlike the restaurants where they normally ate, here there were only simple tables and chairs. Rosetta felt out of her element, especially with all the other students there.

There are so many people here—not to mention the noise.

She’d eaten in the cafeteria at primary school before, but everyone there had been very concerned with etiquette. It hadn’t been nearly this loud. The students crowding the common cafeteria here might as well have been shouting.

As Rosetta tried to find a seat in all the chaos, she spotted someone familiar. “Oh, Darling!”

It was Liam. She was happy to find him in an unexpected place, but a second after starting in his direction, she came to an abrupt stop.

He's talking to Wallace, and he seems awfully serious.

Here in the common cafeteria, of all places, Liam was discussing something with Wallace, whom he'd known since their days at primary school. Since the two of them seemed deeply absorbed in their conversation, Rosetta decided it would be rude to interrupt them. She walked away instead.

I wonder if they're talking about the third prince? It seems like Darling will be busy even here at college... I hope there's something I can do to help him.

In the hubbub of the common cafeteria...

"You don't need to be so mad at me, Liam. I didn't even stay out all night because I was fooling around." Wallace spouted excuses while sitting before me with a lump forming on his head. A lump courtesy of my fist, to be exact.

"The way I heard it, you go out drinking with your unsavory friends every night—which means you're out every night playing around with *my* money. You could at least treat me once in a while."

It annoyed me that he never treated me to a night out, but since I was the one giving him his allowance in the first place, it would have been totally meaningless anyway.

"Come on, what would be the point of that? And I *really* wasn't fooling around, I swear!" Wallace said, desperately proclaiming his innocence.

"Then what were you doing?"

Wallace was perpetually irresponsible, and I couldn't think of anything he'd be doing all night that wasn't messing around. Plus, he'd had a pensive look all morning, so I figured he'd made some big mistake and was worrying about that. Apparently, though, I was off the mark.

"Actually, I was contacted by my older brothers last night."

"Your brothers? Was it Cedric?"

Cedric was one of the princes who his family treated as extraneous, just like Wallace. He was now serving in the army as a major general, in command of a fleet.

“No. It was actually my brothers who are first and second in line to the throne. Do you know what that means?”

I didn’t like what he was implying. I enjoyed testing other people just fine, but I sure didn’t like being tested myself.

“Don’t play games—just tell me what you mean.”

With a little aggressive prompting, Wallace explained himself.

“Don’t glare at me like that! My brothers both want you on their side, so they’re trying to get me to mediate for them. I’m sick of it, honestly. Here I am, trying to get *out* of court politics, and I’m getting wrapped up in them instead.”

Wallace had never wanted anything to do with succession, knowing that if he made one false step, he might die. There could be thousands of people in line for succession, and that meant they’d all be at each other’s throat.

“They want you to mediate? Didn’t the third prince just reach out to me too?”

It had been Prince Cleo, if I recalled correctly.

“Cleo wanted to talk to you directly. The others just want me to recruit you for them.”

“Huh?” I didn’t understand what he meant.

“They want you to come to them yourself with your head bowed, asking to join their factions,” Wallace explained. “You’ll probably need a nice gift and a hefty donation when you go too.”

They’re ordering me to bow to them through Wallace? Who do they think I am? Oh, I’ll bribe people and suck up to those above me, but ordering me to bow my head to them? I’ll choose who I suck up to myself, thank you! Nobody else can pick that for me.

“That’s pretty presumptuous.”

“Well of course it is—they’re the top two candidates for the next emperor.”

I guess that does give them some license to throw their weight around.

“Hmm? Wait a second,” I said. “That means those two already have a good amount of power, right?”

One fear flitted through my mind. The Guide had cautioned me about my “true enemy.” At the end of my prolonged conflict with House Berkeley, he’d appeared before me and warned me that there was still someone else I should be wary of. The first person I’d suspected was the emperor, who as the most powerful person in the Empire could easily get House Berkeley to do whatever he wanted.

Yet from what Wallace was telling me, these princes had a fair amount of authority themselves. Certainly enough to manipulate House Berkeley, I imagined.

“Of course they do,” Wallace replied. “A ton of nobles are working for my brothers right now, so I think that qualifies as ‘a good amount of power.’ The rest of my siblings aren’t exactly weak, but those two are in another league.”

So, the crown prince and the second prince, eh?

“I see...”

I shouldn’t suck up to those two if there was a chance one of them had been manipulating House Berkeley behind the scenes. If I went up to them blindly, they could get their claws in me and squeeze me for all I was worth. No, how could I ever get along with them if they might be the “true enemy” the Guide had personally warned me of? It would be ludicrous to bow my head to people like that.

“Pass along this message to them, Wallace. ‘I respectfully decline.’”

Wallace’s mouth dropped open so wide I was worried he might have dislocated his jaw. “Huuuh? Wh-what are you saying, Liam?! They’re first and second in the line of succession! You’ll totally get on their bad side if you do that!”

To anyone else, this might seem unthinkable, absolutely the wrong choice for a noble. But so what? I didn’t care.

“I already consider them my enemies.”

With every passing moment, I became more convinced the two of them had been manipulating House Berkeley behind the scenes. I didn't trust the emperor either. So what should I do? The answer was simple.

“Wallace, if what you tell me is true, the prince who's third in line barely has any support in his claim to succession, right?”

Wallace had brought this up before. The brother in question was pretty much a prince in name only, with no power of his own. But that was all the more reason...

“That's right. Cleo has no support. I mean, even his own mother's family abandoned him.”

“What's he like?”

“What's he like? Well, he's a cute little brother to me... Actually, I kind of feel sorry for him, but he always puts on a brave face.”

“So he seems all right to you.”

“Of the top three, I'd say Cleo has the other two beat in terms of personality. He just came of age though, so he's a little naive. I think he's diligent and kind, but I can't guarantee he'll always be that way, of course.”

It just went to show how dark the royal family was that Wallace assumed the kid would later have a change of heart. Nevertheless, I was satisfied with what I heard.

“Good enough.”

I had determined that Cleo wasn't a threat to me. Seeing as how he had no real power, it was hard to imagine he might have been pulling the strings for House Berkeley. That alone made him a safe bet in my book. There was still a chance the emperor, the crown prince, or the second prince were my “true enemy,” but even if they weren't, I didn't want to join a faction at the bottom rung because, well, that wouldn't be any fun. Plus, Cleo had already contacted me to ask for my support, but at the time I'd turned down the meeting with some excuse or other.

“I’ll meet with Prince Cleo,” I said, sipping the cheap but tasty coffee of the common cafeteria.

Wallace shuddered. “Huh? Really? You mean—”

“Prince Cleo has my full support in his claim to succession.”

I had the power to take this action, and the subordinates to actually put that support into place. It would be fun to lend Cleo my support and hopefully produce an emperor who’d do whatever I wanted him to. That was evil lord behavior if ever there was.

“This is getting interesting,” I said, but Wallace just helplessly shook his head.

“Interesting is not the right word here.”

I was throwing my hat into the ring of the bloody succession feud of the Imperial royal family, and I’d be the one who’d win in the end! Now that I was free from my economic troubles, I had a lot of power. Two Imperial princes were no match for me.

Besides, I had a powerful ally watching over me. With the Guide on my side, I was invincible!

Far from the Imperial Capital Planet was a planet under the rule of a *different* intergalactic nation. This planet was packed with buildings built in a distinct style unlike those in the Algrand Empire. From the roof of the tallest of these buildings, the Guide looked down on the sprawling metropolis around him. He spread his arms wide, completely unaffected by the gusting winds.

“I’ve been wrong this whole time.”

The Guide reflected on his past errors. He’d been forced to this remote planet to seek out negative emotions, like an animal scrounging for scraps, all because he dreaded Liam. No matter what the Guide did to destroy him, the ignorant boy only thanked him, which caused the Guide great torment. Having fled all the way to this distant nation had helped the Guide clear his head at last and reach a conclusion.

“It was a mistake getting involved with Liam. At this point, I won’t be able to

defeat him with cheap tricks.”

Having assessed Liam’s current strength, the Guide had decided that he wouldn’t be able to get rid of him from inside the Empire. Should he just give up, then? His answer to that consideration was *no*.

The Guide reached his arms up to the sky. “All I have to do is to crush the *Empire*! Yasushi’s training those two to kill Liam, but I can’t rely on that. I’ll set things in motion for the whole Empire to crumble at once.”

He decided he’d get other intergalactic nations involved in a grand conflict, one in which Liam would be killed. So what did he need to make this happen?

“First, I’ll foster discord in this nation. Then, I’ll light fires in the nations on the Empire’s borders, which will eventually grow into the flames of war!”

And those flames, according to the Guide’s plan, would burn down the Empire completely.

“I’ll get *every* nation on the Empire’s borders involved! It will be a huge conflict with the Empire at its very center!”

The Guide’s idea now was to create a situation where multiple intergalactic nations would take care of Liam for him without him having to act against Liam directly. At the same time, he would use a different strategy for himself—to sit back and do nothing.

“I won’t touch you myself, Liam. I know that if I do something to you, you’ll just benefit from it in some way. But make no mistake...I’m always working toward your unhappiness!”

Up until now, the Guide had worked tirelessly to make Liam unhappy. At last, he realized his approach had been a mistake. He had to believe now that *not* doing anything would put Liam in the most danger.

“Liam, I’m going to destroy you from all the way out here, where your poisonous gratitude won’t reach me!”

From this immense distance, the Guide directed his bloodlust at Liam.

Chapter 1:

Who is the True Enemy?

THAT DAY, a great shock went through the Imperial palace. Crown Prince Calvin had received a report that prompted an immediate meeting. The many nobles who supported Calvin, most of them belonging to powerful families, were bewildered when they heard the news he'd received, and an agitated conversation began.

"That minor family House Banfield is getting awfully full of themselves, just because they managed to make a bit of a comeback."

"A bit? Have you been paying attention? House Banfield has more power now than they ever did in their heyday. The current head is a formidable man, to be sure."

"He's an arrogant prick if he rejected the crown prince's invitation."

The report Calvin had received was that Liam had requested a meeting with Cleo Noah Albareto. No one would be batting an eye if it was simply a routine meeting, but according to a spy who kept a close eye on Cleo, Liam intended to put his full support behind the third prince.

Since gaining more power in recent times, House Banfield had been on these nobles' radar. They couldn't help but wonder—who would House Banfield side with? Would it be Calvin? Or Linus? Shocking them all, Count Banfield announced his support of Cleo instead. The nobles who sided with Calvin were completely baffled by his unexpected choice.

"I'm curious to see how the nobles close to House Banfield respond to this."

"Many of the nobles on the outskirts don't care much for matters of the palace, but some will likely align with Banfield."

"So a third faction is going to form around Prince Cleo? This isn't good."

Prince Calvin was a young man with a neat mustache and long straight hair that swept out at the ends. His face wore a somewhat mournful expression as

he listened to the nobles of his faction discuss these matters.

“So I suppose I can’t count on Count Banfield’s support,” he said. “But why is he siding with Cleo of all people? My brother Wallace is friendly with him, so he must have at least heard about Cleo from him.”

Wallace himself was of no consequence to these nobles, but they knew Wallace to be close to his brother Cedric, a major general in the army.

One of the nobles reminded them, “Count Banfield lent Prince Cedric support as well.”

“Those two must be in Prince Cleo’s faction then,” said another noble. “If any more royals back him, this will get very complicated.”

Calvin sighed. “I’d prefer not to lose too many younger siblings.”

Calvin’s words could be interpreted as softhearted, but the nobles responded to this in a tone that was more concerned than scolding.

“Too much compassion will only harm you in the long run, Your Highness.”

“Misplaced pity will only endanger your own life.”

“We’ll have to do a thorough check of the other royals’ stances on this matter.”

If anything got in the way of their plans, the nobles were prepared to deal with it, even if that meant taking on other members of the royal family. Everyone present was intent on making sure that Calvin became the next emperor. After all, their future positions depended on it. If they could guarantee Calvin’s position as emperor, they themselves would be afforded positions of power, along with all the perks that came with that. However, if Calvin failed in his attempt at the throne, they were sure to face retaliation from the next emperor for their support of him.

One of the nobles brought up Calvin’s most troublesome enemy: the second in line for the throne, Linus Noah Albareto.

“Prince Linus is sure to make use of this opportunity. We should act quickly ourselves, Your Highness.”

The Empire had its own circumstances going on, but with what was

happening in the surrounding nations as well, this was the perfect opportunity to settle the inheritance dispute.

After considering the matter for a moment, Calvin nodded. "If only Linus was a little less ambitious, I wouldn't have to do this."

Meanwhile, in a different part of the palace, the second prince's faction was also meeting.

Linus was a tall, attractive man with sharp, vulpine features. In contrast to his fine appearance, however, there was an undeniable pressure he exerted on those around him. Linus harbored an ambition to succeed over his brother Calvin in becoming the next emperor, but with Calvin's faction being bigger than his own, he felt rather desperate.

"I've received a report from a spy I slipped into Cleo's ranks. It appears Count Banfield has declined to join my faction."

Hearing this, his gathered noble supporters grew uneasy.

"What?"

"He turned down the invitation of Prince Linus?"

"What shall we do, Your Highness?"

Linus was irritated to no end that some country bumpkin noble from the outskirts had dared to disrespect him this way.

"Seems he's not supporting me or my older brother, but Cleo. What do you suppose that means? That Cleo's a better bet than either of us?"

The nobles all fell silent, the looks on their faces making it obvious they didn't want to say the wrong thing and earn Linus's ire. To an outsider, it would be apparent that these nobles were lacking when compared to those in Calvin's faction. Besides having less financial and military strength, they also seemed to possess an inferior grasp of tradition and social graces. On an individual level, they were less capable and held less important positions in the empire than those in Calvin's faction. In fact, many of them had only joined Linus's faction because they were unable to join Calvin's. There were a handful of powerful

nobles who wished to elevate Linus to power for their own benefit, but even then, none were as powerful as the nobles who backed Calvin. Because the members of this faction were all lacking in some way, they'd hoped to get the recently distinguished House Banfield on their side. But now, the count had just declined Linus's invitation.

"Some outskirts count thinks he can reject my invitation and side with that joke of a third-in-line brother of mine? We can't stand for that, now can we?"

One of the nobles, guessing what Linus was implying, quickly cautioned him. "Your Highness, I believe any feud with House Banfield would only work against us and benefit the crown prince. Moreover, I'm concerned about the movements of our neighboring nations. It may not be wise to lose focus at this time."

These nobles didn't want to enter into new hostilities when they were already feuding with Calvin, who was clearly their biggest threat.

Linus might have agreed with them, but his pride was getting in the way. He simply couldn't allow Liam to get away with slighting him.

"You want me to turn tail from a mere count? That would ruin my reputation!"

The nobles persisted in trying to dissuade Linus.

"This is a crucial period, so we must tread carefully. Not to mention, House Banfield destroyed House Berkeley. They're not just any count's family."

"Your Highness, we really mustn't dismiss the activity of our neighboring nations. Getting into it with House Banfield right now would divert our attention."

Linus just smiled confidently. "I understand that, and I don't intend to enter into an all-out war here, but somehow this needs to be made right. Don't you think so? Not only did Banfield turn down my offer, but he kicked sand in my face on his way out. I'm not going to let him get away with that."

The nobles all exchanged glances. They were relieved that Linus didn't plan on waging war on House Banfield at this time, but they were curious what sort of retribution he had in mind instead.

“What do you intend to do?”

Linus projected a holograph that displayed information about House Banfield in the air in front of himself. Scanning through this data, he could see how House Banfield had managed to make its fortune.

“Those rare metals he’s used to build his fortune...he sold a bunch of them off to the Empire not long ago, correct? Now the Empire’s stores of rare metals are in a much better place than they were previously, wouldn’t you say?”

The idea Linus had hit on was to limit the amount of rare metals Liam was allowed to sell.

“I’m sure he sold rare metals to other nations too,” he continued. “A scoundrel like that can’t go unpunished, can he?”

“You mean to frame House Banfield?”

“Frame? How would you prove such a thing? I’m sure he’s doing *something* dirty. If we shake him a bit, we’ll see what falls out.”

Even if the accusation was false, Linus was sure something would turn up in the ensuing investigation. If not, then he’d simply fabricate something.

One noble raised a concern about Linus’s plan. “Your Highness, House Banfield has powerful merchant allies in the Clave Firm and Newlands Company. Through them, he has plenty of avenues to sell his rare metals. If the Empire cracks down on his sales, then he may truly begin selling to other nations.”

Linus knew about Liam’s merchant allies. “Right... He’s got Elliot from Clave and Patrice from Newlands on his side, yeah? But the companies themselves don’t support him, and that’s the important part. I’m sure there are other people in those companies who’d like to knock those two agents down a peg.”

If he got those two merchant allies expelled, it would certainly teach House Banfield a lesson. The nobles all agreed that this was a reasonable compromise, rather than taking a conflict with House Banfield too far so it would jeopardize their feud with Calvin’s faction.

Linus theorized about Liam’s future betrayal of the Empire. “If House Banfield

does sell rare metals to other nations, then that's convenient for us. We can use it to impose greater sanctions against him. When he comes to me humbled and begging for forgiveness, I'll let him join my faction and make good use of him from then on."

A mere outskirts count would truly be put in his place if found to have betrayed the Empire. Linus felt confidence in his quickly devised plan of action, but one of his nobles voiced a touch of apprehension.

"Indeed, when the time is right you could strike a deal with the count, and we could make use of him in our fight with the crown prince. I can't imagine Prince Calvin will try to win him to his side again after the count already turned him down once. However, the count might seek out Prince Calvin himself if he develops a grudge against us..."

Linus understood the noble's apprehension. "But of course. I don't want him to hold a grudge against us...only to make him regret turning me down. I'm already looking forward to seeing him beg for forgiveness."

"Cheers!"

The shout went up in a crowded public bar. As this establishment was close to the university, students gathered there for food and drink almost every night, and the bar made a tidy profit as a result. Many of the groups of students came together to form fun little mixers.

So...why was I missing out on the fun?

"What's the meaning of this, Wallace?"

I couldn't help taking my anger out on him as we sat at the bar drinking by ourselves. I slammed my glass down on the bar, but it was tough enough that it didn't break.

Wallace ignored me, throwing back the latest in a long line of stiff drinks. That annoyed me, so I reached out and pulled his face close to mine.

"I told you to set up a mixer for me, didn't I? What happened to your promise to round up a few cute girls?"

I shook him by the lapels and Wallace laughed in a strange way. It was kind of creepy.

“I-it’s over. It’s all over for me. Apparently, my brothers have been talking about me and I’m about to be dragged right into the succession conflict.”

Wallace was broken. Despite his promise, the two of us were now drinking all by our lonesome in the middle of a crowded bar.

“Listen, you... I was looking forward to the mixer.”

I really thought I could finally make good on my vow to fool around this time, so I was beside myself with disappointment. I shook Wallace a few more times, but he just laughed again and didn’t acknowledge me at all. Eventually, I just let him go and resumed drinking myself.

“Liam, you idiot!” he suddenly blurted. “With both my brothers holding a grudge against you, no matter which of them becomes emperor, we’re done for!”

The succession conflict truly was a matter of life and death. If you picked the wrong side and lost, all that awaited you was ruin. The manner in which you met your fate would vary depending on who became the next emperor. A simple execution would be a mercy. Plenty of people lost their lives in such a conflict, but even more terrifying was the prospect of torture. Wallace had always tried not to get involved in the conflict out of fear of these consequences.

I started feeling sorry for him and pretended to pour him another drink, filling his glass with water instead. Wallace sipped at it, unable to even tell what he was drinking anymore.

“Will you just calm down already? Why would I side with the third prince if I had no way of winning?” I said.

“What way? Cleo was losing from the start! He has no chance of winning!”

Wallace was so certain, and that made me curious. It shouldn’t be that rare for someone unexpected to win in a succession conflict, right?

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Wallace hung his head, an odd look on his face. There was pity for Cleo in that expression. “Cleo’s a girl. I mean, he was. He used to be a girl.”

“What?”

“He was born a girl, but his birth mother insisted he was a boy!”

I found his wording strange. This world didn’t just have magic—it had advanced technology as well. In a world like this, you could probably even *choose* the sex of your child. Sex reassignments were fairly common procedures here as well.

“Why not just have a boy? Or change the sex of the kid?”

Wallace told me what he’d heard at the palace. “It was my father’s choice. Cleo’s mother’s family originally belonged to a faction that opposed him, but when he became emperor, they gave Cleo’s mother to him. My father made a gesture of accepting her, but her family had given him grief before he became the emperor.”

Cleo’s mother’s family was large and powerful. The emperor had reluctantly made a deal with them, but he couldn’t forget his grudge against them either. He got his payback in an underhanded way.

“He forbade her from changing the sex of her children. He got the doctors in on it too so they wouldn’t reveal the kids’ genders until they were born. Cleo’s mother had three kids, and all of them were girls. Her third was her last chance, and if she struck out, it’d be all over for her.”

“All over?”

“She’d lose her position in the court. Other wives were giving birth to boys. But since she was only having girls, her position would suffer.”

I couldn’t really fault her for worrying about this. For the women of the palace, that was their entire world. Their position in court was their position in society as a whole. For a prideful noblewoman, a diminished status would be unbearable.

“So she lied about Cleo?”

“No, I heard she actually had Cleo made into a man, and when my father

found out he just laughed and said, ‘Then I’ll make him third in line.’”

“Well, there’s no problem if he’s a man, right?”

People were completely free to change their gender in this society. I glanced around at the bar’s noisy crowd and wondered if anyone here had done so. It was kind of a strange thought, but...what *is* gender, anyway?

Wallace slammed his glass down on the counter. “There *is* a problem! If he allowed sex changes, then *all* my little sisters would become little brothers! So my father made Cleo into a laughingstock—the fool who lied his way into being a prince.”

Children in the line of succession weren’t allowed to change their gender because it would further complicate the succession conflict. Some princesses would become men for a chance to be emperor, and some men like Wallace might want to become women in order to escape from the succession conflict. It would be chaos.

In any case, Cleo’s status as third in line was merely symbolic. His actual position was beyond inferior. Nevertheless, when Wallace revealed this to me, I saw it as an opportunity more than anything else.

“This is good.” I smiled and drained the liquor in my glass while Wallace blinked at me.

“Good how? Were you listening to what I said? Cleo has no future!”

“He does! If he’s accepted as a man, then there’s no problem. In fact, he’s perfect.”

Cleo was a prince in opposition with his father, who very well could be my enemy. Even if he didn’t oppose the emperor directly, they clearly didn’t get along. In other words, Cleo was almost certainly not allied with my “true enemy.” He *resented* the emperor at the very least—which meant we had an enemy in common. That is, if the emperor truly was my enemy.

I really was lucky to have found someone like Cleo.

“We’re having a pre-celebration tonight, Wallace. Drink as much as you like,” I said, ordering some pricier liquor from the bartender.

Wallace started drinking again. “You don’t need to tell me. I’ll drink it *all*, dammit!”

Chapter 2:

Economic Sanctions

IN A SECTOR of space controlled by House Banfield...

Several thin streaks of light flashed against the darkness of space before disappearing. A battle was being fought.

“Chengsi! If you can hear me, respond!”

Why did I get someone like this assigned to my squad?

A weighty craft, the Raccoon, raced through the battlefield, and this next-generation mobile knight that had been developed by the Seventh Weapons Factory was piloted by one Claus Sera Mont. Claus was over three hundred years old but had the appearance of a life-hardened thirtysomething. The fact that the constant hardships he endured showed in his appearance weighed on him somewhat.

Claus currently served House Banfield as a knight, but he displayed none of the fanatical devotion that the other knights Tia and Marie were known for. He had a reasonable amount of loyalty to Liam, but nothing more than that. Tia and Marie were talented, but they took their devotion too far. Claus, on the other hand, was more of an average knight who didn’t quite measure up to those two in terms of skill. Still, he was proud of the experience he’d accrued and his unparalleled ability to not let his anxiety show on his face or in his actions.

The Raccoon was a heavy craft, green in color. It carried a large container on its back and had a gatling gun equipped to its right arm. The craft Claus favored was a support type, with a few other heavy weapons in its arsenal.

The green Raccoon was following the red-colored Teumessa, which was chasing around some pirates who had invaded their territory. The Teumessa had also been created by the Seventh Weapons Factory, but it had a slimmer design than the Raccoon and its form resembled a fox. The optional parts attached to its arms were iron balls and beam weapons. Ignoring its allied craft,

the red Teumessa was rushing into the enemy's ranks, swinging its iron balls about.

"None of these enemies are worth my time," the Teumessa's pilot responded.

This pilot was Chengsi Sera Tohrei. She wore a red pilot suit and sat in her cockpit with no helmet on. Her glossy black hair was done up in pigtails. Her skin was pale, and red makeup marked the edges of her fierce-looking eyes. She wore deep red lipstick as well. Chengsi was a beautiful girl with delicate features almost like a doll, but her true nature was that of a knight who was absolutely obsessed with battle.

"Get back here, Chengsi!"

"No."

Though his order was immediately refused, Claus couldn't abandon the single craft charging into the fleet of enemy pirate ships. He provided her with support by firing a barrage of small missiles from the missile pods on the Raccoon's shoulders.

Why is every one of my subordinates so damned bloodthirsty?

Claus was called the "Busy Work Chief" among House Banfield staff, constantly saddled with troublesome tasks and problematic subordinates. Chengsi was certainly one of the latter.

Some knights whose abilities surpassed those of normal people were entranced by battle. They were tragic people, only interested in fighting with their lives on the line, finding no meaning in anything else. The worst of these were people like Chengsi, who would get into it with foe and ally alike, just so long as they were fighting with someone. Such knights were often lost to the chaos of battle, but Chengsi's skills were the real deal. She couldn't command a fleet, but sitting in a mobile knight or one-on-one fight, she was one of House Banfield's strongest knights—if not the strongest. Because of her abilities, she was a dangerous knight who was difficult to deal with.

Claus's subordinates approached him in their own mobile knights, all Nemain models. Their craft were next-generation tech mass-produced by the Third Weapons Factory, Claus was the only one in a Raccoon.

“Just let her be, Commander Claus.”

“Yeah. She’s too dangerous. She’d just as soon kill her allies as her enemies.”

“Maybe we should just let her go and...”

Chengsi had come to House Banfield very recently, and Claus’s subordinates were all afraid of her. Since she hadn’t been in service to House Banfield for years like many of the others, she didn’t have any loyalty to the family. She had fled from the family she’d previously served because she’d resented her orders there. She apparently had even killed her superior. When they’d sent mobile knights and ships after her, she’d destroyed them. She was highly skilled, but she was like a wild beast no one could tame. Claus’s men were terrified, because they didn’t know when she might turn on them too.

“No,” Claus told his team. “We need Chengsi’s strength to get out of this situation. The enemy has twice our numbers. This is no time to be fighting amongst ourselves.”

Claus’s fleet of a couple dozen units had encountered a pirate armada of almost a hundred ships. They alerted their allies, but reinforcements would take time to arrive. Normally, they would have just waited for those reinforcements to show up, but the pirates had attacked them first and forced them into a fight.

“We’ll give Chengsi backup. Let’s engage them here until our allies arrive!”

“Yes, sir.”

His subordinates reluctantly obeyed Claus’s orders.

The gatling gun on Claus’s Raccoon spewed flames, but inside the craft, Claus was fed up with his situation.

I can’t handle Chengsi, but I still have to carry out my mission.

A diligent knight at heart, Claus felt a heavy sense of responsibility.

“Y-you want *me* to guard Lord Liam?”

After encountering the pirates on his patrol mission, what awaited Claus upon

his victorious return was a transfer. Assigning him his new orders was Amagi, who was presently stationed on the Imperial Capital Planet.

Through long-range communication, she explained his new orders. *“Please reorganize your unit and take a fleet to the Imperial Capital Planet.”*

Beginning to sweat, Claus asked if this was some kind of mistake. “Are you sure? I haven’t really done anything to earn such a prestigious position. You should send someone elite to guard Lord Liam.”

“I agree—and that is why I have selected you. I have evaluated your record, and you are rated highly. Master has approved of the decision as well, and he is preparing for the army’s reorganization.”

“Rated highly? I’m sorry, but that doesn’t make sense. Unlike some others, I have no notable achievements to my name.”

Claus’s history as a knight was all rather routine, which was precisely why he earned the nickname “Busywork Chief.” But he was talking to Amagi—a maid robot possessing artificial intelligence with no emotional bias or impulsive human behavior.

“You have maintained a high completion rate of routine but difficult missions, and you also handle troublesome subordinates skillfully.”

Chengsi’s face immediately popped into his mind.

“I suppose, but...”

Just barely! My squad could have come apart at the seams at any moment!

He felt like Amagi was overestimating him and he tried to protest further, but it was no use.

“We await your arrival on the Capital Planet.”

The call ended, and all the blood drained from Claus’s face.

“How did this happen?”

Claus found himself sighing a lot lately. He was trying to stop himself from doing so, but he was having little success.

The reason for his stress was simple: he desired only a stable life. He wasn't very interested in getting ahead. And yet for some reason, he had been assigned to the Capital Planet to guard Liam.

If this were a normal mission it wouldn't be an issue, but the timing was unfortunate. House Banfield's two top knights, Christiana and Marie, had both incurred Liam's displeasure and were demoted. The two of them currently led feuding factions, both intent on gaining the position of head knight. In other words, there was a fierce competition over who could win the most meritorious achievements. Now, amid that competition, Claus was to serve at Liam's side, which would definitely earn him the ire of both factions.

As Claus walked down a hallway, other knights glared at him with eyes full of open hostility. A knight who had coasted under the radar until now had suddenly won Liam's trust, while Tia and Marie were off hunting pirates to try to win back that very same trust. It gave the impression that Claus had taken advantage of their absence to steal the lead from them.

"I wasn't even interested in getting ahead!"

Claus had always backed up other people and allowed others to claim battlefield achievements. He liked doing routine work and was satisfied with where it had gotten him in his life. At first, he was happy to have been evaluated highly, but now he felt awkward in the position he found himself in as a result.

Plus, he'd be dealing with something even *more* troublesome than resentful knights—people who looked upon him with adoration. They were already starting to appear.

"Congratulations, Commander Claus! At this point you're a shoo-in for head knight!"

"If you're guarding Lord Liam, that must mean he trusts you more than anyone else! The Christiana and Marie factions are fuming!"

"Commander Claus is the new head knight for sure! Christiana and Marie are no match for you, Commander!"

The knights in Tia's and Marie's factions only grew more outraged when they

heard what Claus's subordinates were saying, and the worst part of it was that Claus's people knew exactly what they were doing. By singing Claus's praises, they were purposely provoking the other knights.

Do you guys have a grudge against me or something? Pay attention to the environment you're creating here!

Claus's excited subordinates were forming a new faction around him, just like those of Tia and Marie.

How did this happen?

Not all of House Banfield's knights had fallen into either Tia's or Marie's fanatical team. There was a fiery group of knights who were simply happy serving under Liam because it meant they got to fight as much as they wanted. Then, there were those more intuitive knights who came to serve House Banfield because of the power they saw it accruing. To these other groups, Claus's new assignment to guard Liam was a breath of fresh air.

Claus sighed and tried to calm his subordinates down. "Please compose yourselves. Our mission is to hurry to the Capital Planet and guard Lord Liam. You all need to make sure you're prepared to leave immediately, all right?"

After his calm order, Claus's subordinates saluted him sharply. "Yes, sir!"

When his people dispersed, Claus felt his shoulders sag. "I just want to go back to a normal knight squad..."

Just as he let his true feelings slip, someone else approached him. He didn't notice them until they were right next to him, when it was too late to raise his guard. The other person was almost close enough for their lips to touch his before he realized who it was.

"What do you want, Chengsi?"

"Aw, you didn't even look surprised. You're no fun, Claus."

Chengsi shrugged, disappointed that her prank to surprise him had been unsuccessful. She had called her direct superior by his first name, but that was nothing new to Claus. He couldn't bring himself to reprimand her for it either. She gazed at him in an entranced sort of way. If he didn't know any better, he'd

think this beautiful woman was absolutely smitten with him, but Claus knew Chengsi was far more complex than that. Her expression only filled him with dread.

What is she thinking?

Chengsi wasn't in her pilot suit anymore. She had changed into more traditional clothing for her, which was a red dress with a high slit.

"Claus, I'm going to the Capital Planet with you."

"Excuse me?"

Chengsi was demanding that Claus take her with him on his new assignment.

"I want to see that Way of the Flash I've heard so much about. It sounds fascinating, don't you think?" she said with an excited smile.

Claus sensed danger. *She's not going to try and challenge Lord Liam, is she?*

Strong knights sometimes acted with reckless bravado. Chengsi was exactly the type to do so, and she was given confidence by a winning streak that had never been broken due to her innate talents. She might seriously believe she could beat even Liam.

Claus sighed, glaring at her. "Unfortunately, Lord Liam has requested your presence as well. I already planned on bringing you."

"Oh? He asked for me? Could that be considered an invitation?"

The woman's alluring smile caused Claus to break out in a cold sweat. "An invitation to what? Don't do anything stupid, all right?"

Why would Lord Liam summon someone like her to the Capital Planet too?
Ahh, my stomach hurts...

A problem child like Chengsi, summoned along with him. Still, there was no way Claus could disobey Liam's orders, so he would be forced to bring her with him.

Even after I made them aware of her behavior too.

Claus wept internally as he pictured all the troubles in his future.

A visitor made his way to Linus's office. It was the prime minister who had long served the Empire. Linus sat down and leaned back in his chair casually across from the old man seated in front of him. The prime minister's gaze was cold at Linus's lack of respect.

"Do you understand what it is you've done, Your Highness?" the prime minister asked.

Linus turned and gazed out the window. Though he was no longer facing the prime minister, the older man could see the prince's smiling face reflected in the glass.

"You think rather highly of Count Banfield, don't you, Prime Minister? Still, favoritism isn't a good thing, you know?"

"So you'd enforce sanctions on anyone who won't join your faction... Is that it, Your Highness?"

The prime minister wielded a great amount of influence in the Empire, and there were those who didn't appreciate that fact—Linus being one of them. The prime minister controlled the Empire from the shadows, and Linus would rather he didn't exist.

Linus said, "Well, he's suspected of committing a crime. Unlawful trade of rare metals is a serious offense in the Empire, is it not?"

"You can accuse anyone of a crime if you don't need proof to make your allegations."

"Oh, I'll investigate him, don't you worry. But when I voiced my suspicions, many a noble agreed with me. Count Banfield has gone a little too far, they say."

The nobles Linus spoke of would jump on any excuse to crush Liam, feeling threatened by him now that he'd made a name for himself.

Linus continued, "House Banfield needs to suffer consequences for their actions. Economic sanctions are just part of those consequences."

It wasn't just Linus taking these actions. Following his brother's lead, Calvin was demanding sanctions against House Banfield as well.

Linus held a self-satisfied grin, but the prime minister warned him, “Your Highness, there are those who are simply born under a lucky star. It’s unwise to oppose these people while they have such luck on their side.”

Linus turned around and looked the prime minister square in the eye. “I was born into royalty, just a stone’s throw away from the position of crown prince, and you suggest I have no luck? You think I’d lose in a conflict with a hick noble from the outskirts of the Empire?”

The prime minister shook his head. “You’re the one who issued the challenge, Your Highness. There’s nothing I can say. I hope you understand what it would mean to lose this contest, however.”

“I understand well enough. My life has always been on the line.”

It wasn’t just once or twice that Linus had almost been killed in the succession conflict. His luck in escaping that fate was just another reason for his confidence in challenging Liam.

“If he’s really as strong as they say, I’ll even bow my head to him if I must, just to win him to my side.”

“Well...you can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The prime minister left Linus’s office and immediately contacted Serena, his spy at House Banfield.

On the day of my appointment with Prince Cleo, I went to a facility near the palace that was reserved for meetings. I was dressed in formal attire and accompanied by my knights. Aside from the staff, people without connections to the royal family weren’t allowed to enter the palace, so anyone engaging in this sort of meeting had to go to a place that was closely monitored.

I sat in a waiting room just outside the facility. In addition to my guards, Wallace accompanied me as well. He sat there, fidgeting, unable to maintain his composure.

“Will you cut that out?” I told him. “You’re annoying me.”

“How am I supposed to relax? I’m responsible for setting up this meeting

between you and Cleo! Ahh, my stomach is killing me!”

Having little else to do while I waited, I watched Wallace fret about what he imagined was to come, but when my annoyance with him became too much I shifted my gaze to the knights who formed my guard instead. They had been summoned from my home territory after Tia and Marie’s demotion.

These new knights were led by a man named Claus, who I’d only met a handful of times. He’d come recommended by Amagi. She had described him as a hard worker who humbly didn’t try to stand out. To be honest, I wanted to surround myself with beautiful women if I could, but I didn’t want to ignore Amagi’s counsel either. I accepted her suggestion of Mr. Reliable, but I requested that a woman chosen for her looks accompanied him. I was told her name was Chengsi, and she was a mysterious beauty with a Chinese look to her.

An evil lord needs beautiful women attending to him. I’d be demotivated if all I had around me were men all the time, after all.

As I surveyed my new knight detail, Claus received a report on his tablet. It must have been important because he approached me immediately.

“Lord Liam, I’ve received an urgent message from your domain.”

“What is it?”

I was a little annoyed that my elegant teatime in the waiting room had been interrupted.

“My lord, there is talk that forces in the palace are planning on levying economic sanctions against House Banfield. The information is solid, so it’s extremely likely to be true.”

I merely sipped my tea, unsurprised. “What sort of sanctions?”

“Restrictions on House Banfield’s ability to sell rare metals.”

What that meant was anyone in the Empire who bought rare metals from me could face trouble. Even if I used my merchant contacts as intermediaries, the deals would be subject to heavy tariffs, making it pretty much impossible for me to sell rare metals in the Empire going forward.

“Who’s behind it?”

“Prince Linus, reportedly.”

“Ah yes, Mr. Second-in-Line. Must be payback for not joining his faction.”

When they heard the words “economic sanctions,” all the knights in the room other than calm-looking Claus began to look agitated. I wasn’t worried, however. I had the Guide’s protection in all conflicts. Not even this hostile stunt could scare me.

“What should we do?” Claus asked.

I thought for a moment, then responded, “For now, we’ll stick to prioritizing my meeting with Prince Cleo. We can think of solutions after that... I’ll be calling my merchant contacts afterward, to start.”

You’ve really done it now, Linus. He was probably trying to take me down a peg, but it wasn’t going to go that way. Now I know for sure we’re enemies.

“Lord Liam, are you going to feud with Prince Linus?”

“He’s the one who picked a fight with me. It’d be rude not to reciprocate, wouldn’t it?”

“N-no, I believe the provocation came from our end. Rejecting Prince Linus’s invitation would be perceived as combative.”

That was the problem. Since we were being watched here, I motioned for Claus to step close so I could whisper to him.

“I didn’t like that he was ordering me to go bow my head to him,” I said. “Though, I suppose I would have done it if Prince Linus was sure to be the next emperor.”

“He’s still a major contender, you know.”

“But *just* a contender. I didn’t reject an invitation from the next emperor, Claus. *I’m* going to choose who the next emperor will be. Don’t be mistaken.”

There’s a way to go about things if you want my help. You can’t just summon me and force me to swear my allegiance to you. Anyway, if I’m going to make one of these princes my puppet, Cleo seemed to be the easiest option. The biggest supporter in his faction right now is me, so he won’t be able to stand up to me down the road.

The current emperor, Calvin, and Linus were all contenders for what the Guide had called my “true enemy,” so they were going to have to disappear. If they didn’t, they would get in the way of the easy life I’d chosen, so I decided to eliminate them in any way I could. The two who weren’t the “true enemy” would get caught in the crossfire, but I didn’t care about that. Anyone who threatened my peace was my foe!

Eventually, knights of the palace arrived to indicate an end to our waiting.

“Good—I can finally meet with Prince Cleo.”

Liam’s guards all tensed up as the palace knights surrounded them in the waiting room, and their commander, Claus, was just as nervous as the rest.

Lord Liam’s so open with his disrespect, and in a place like this too. If it were anyone other than him, I’d be scolding them for being a damned fool.

However, considering Liam’s track record, it was clear he was no mere fool. Many knights had vowed to serve Liam precisely because of that track record.

Claus flicked his uneasy gaze to one of his own knights—the only one among the group with a smile on her face that seemed completely out of line with the current situation. It was Chengsi.

“This is great,” she purred. “Gets my blood pumping.”

Chengsi was flushed, apparently aroused by Liam’s behavior. Claus wouldn’t be surprised if she attacked Liam on the spot. Chengsi craved a fight with another worthy warrior, even if that warrior was her lord, and Claus didn’t know what to do about it. The worst part about it was that it was Liam himself who had requested her as a guard.

Give me a break, Lord Liam! Why did we have to bring her with us today, of all days?

Claus did his best to ignore the pain in his stomach, standing tall despite his discomfort.

A female knight arrived in the waiting room. She was tall and wore a steely expression, with rebellious hair restrained in a ponytail.

Just one guard for a member of the royal family? Claus wondered.

Her build was solid—her mastery of some martial arts style or another clear at a glance—but she still didn't seem up to the task of escorting an important patron like Liam. Even if she'd been chosen for her connections, Claus felt a more fitting escort for Liam should have been chosen.

However, when Wallace stood up upon seeing this female knight, Claus's fears were dispelled.

"Lysithea!"

Wallace acted relieved to see a familiar face, but the knight he'd called Lysithea just sighed with exasperation. Even so, her no-nonsense expression had a subtle hint of happiness, as well.

Lysithea turned to face Liam and introduced herself. "I am Lysithea Noah Albareto, Cleo's sister and his personal knight. It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Count Banfield."

Liam stood from his seat. "A royal knight, eh?"

"I can explain later. His Highness is ready. Let me take you to him."

The royal meeting room was excessively lavish. It was an indoor space that was more like a botanical garden but with a table and chairs at the center. The royal family's maids were stationed here and there, and all the guards present were female knights.

The palace was where the emperor and his family lived. That included all his wives, of course, but no men unrelated to the emperor were permitted to live there. In olden times, eunuchs would have been permitted inside, but nowadays when changing one's sex was a simple procedure, only biological women were allowed inside the palace. The only exceptions were the Imperial princes who were the emperor's own children.

One such child, third in line to the throne, Cleo Noah Albareto, sat before me now.

"It's nice to meet you, Count Banfield."

Cleo's red hair was mostly cut short, but on the right side had grown down to his shoulder. He had an androgynous face, and if someone told me he was a woman instead, I wouldn't have questioned it. In terms of my past life, he looked like a thirteen-year-old—a delicate boy who seemed far from anything one might consider "strength."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I—" I started on the needlessly lengthy greeting that was customary in such a setting, but Cleo cut me off with a raise of his hand.

He got right to the point. "That's not necessary. You're a busy man, Count. Let's cut to the chase."

I liked that he wasn't one for pointless formality, but Cleo's next words were apologetic.

"I would certainly appreciate your support, Count Banfield. Nothing would comfort me more than having you back me. Unfortunately, I have no way to repay you for your kindness."

Honest guy. But really, he should just say, "Make me emperor and I'll grant you your wildest dreams!"

Following Cleo's lead, I dropped all pretenses too. "You're honest. I like that you don't make empty promises just to gain support. I think we'll get along fine."

Lysithea, standing behind and to the side of Cleo, glared at me when I dropped my formal tone. I judged her to be only average or slightly above as a knight, so I felt I had nothing to fear from her. Apparently she became a knight in order to protect her brother as he had few allies in the palace. It was a commendable display of familial love, but if you didn't have the strength to back that up, in the end it was meaningless.

I smiled at her, and Lysithea shuddered. *Guess she's at least perceptive enough to sense the difference in our skill levels.*

Catching on, Cleo chided his sister. "I find no fault with the count for his informality, Lysithea."

"U-understood." Lysithea backed down, and Cleo turned back to face me.

“So, why do you lend me your support, Count? As you know, I have no real power. I can offer you nothing in return, as I’ve said.”

I was never looking for anything from Cleo the prince.

“The answer is simple. To make you the emperor.”

“What?” Cleo looked like he doubted my very sanity. “Are you serious? My circumstances are not favorable. I’m third in line in name only. My actual position is quite far from the throne.”

His defeatist attitude wasn’t the right stance to take as a royal, but I respected Cleo’s decision to be upfront with me.

“I’ve heard the particulars from Wallace. It’s why I chose you—you didn’t choose me. It’s an important distinction.”

My attitude must have come across as awfully haughty because Cleo had an astonished look on his face.

“You’re a confident one, aren’t you?”

“I can’t back down from this fight... Not when Prince Linus is already taking action against me.”

Cleo was surprised to hear Linus’s name brought up this way. “He has?”

Apparently, Cleo wasn’t privy to any inside info on what went on in the palace. Realizing this, his low position was made even clearer to me. After all, even though he lived in the palace, he wasn’t even able to obtain information I learned on the outside.

“I’m serious about my support for you, and don’t feel like you need to hold back with me, Your Highness. Anything you want, I’ll get it for you—as long as it’s part of your bid for the throne, that is.”

Cleo looked pale now that he knew I was already in a feud with the second prince. I was starting to become disappointed in him, but he suddenly put on a brave face.

“I’d heard you were a prodigy, but I wasn’t expecting this. You seem confident, even when it comes to my brother. It’s quite daring. Do you really think you can best him?”

“If I’m gonna do this, I’m gonna win. There’s no point to it otherwise.”

I was only stating the obvious, but Cleo repeated my words in a quiet murmur. He then looked up at me with a new light in his eyes. It seemed I’d managed to get him motivated.

“Count, you said you could get me anything I want? Well, sorry, but I want it *all*. Funds, personnel, military strength... I’m lacking all three. In fact, you could even say I have nothing at all right now.”

“I’m aware,” I said.

“And you seriously aim to make me the emperor? Is it really possible?”

“Of course.” I was seriously convinced I could make this prince-in-name-only the emperor.

To do that, Cleo needed to gain some authority. We needed to demonstrate to the other nobles he possessed *real* power. Vast wealth, talented personnel, and military strength—I needed to provide him with all these things.

“I’ll get you everything you need. On the subject of military strength, while I’m here on the Capital Planet, I have 3,000 ships standing by at a nearby planet I can move whenever I need to.”

“3,000 ships?” Lysithea exclaimed before Cleo could react. “Err, I apologize.”

Lysithea was surprised at herself for having barged into our conversation. Her face flushed in shame for her breach in etiquette. It made me want to tease her, so I pretended not to have noticed her apology and raised the number.

“Oh? Is that not enough? I can summon up to 12,000 more. Please use them freely to display your military might, Your Highness.”

Lysithea seemed utterly stunned by the number.



Cleo was surprised by the increased offer as well and expressed his thanks sincerely. “I appreciate it, but I’m not sure I’d be able to handle that many.”

Hearing Cleo’s hesitation made me a little nervous about the future. I decided I needed to dispatch an aide to provide him military assistance. In that case, I had just the person in mind...

“You’ll have to get used to controlling a fleet like that. I happen to have some highly skilled knights who aren’t up to much at the moment. I’ll leave one of them with you to act as a military advisor, and you can also use her to stay in contact with me.”

I explained my plan, projecting a holographic document for the prince to view. This was a sort of resume with a picture attached, and in this way I introduced him to Tia.

“Her name is Christiana. Frankly, her personality leaves something to be desired, but she’s a talented knight. Please feel free to make good use of her.”

Lysithea responded instantly, recognizing the name. “Wait, you mean Brigadier General Christiana?”

Cleo looked a little exasperated that his sister kept interrupting, but he was curious himself. “Is she famous?”

Deeply embarrassed again, Lysithea explained, “Y-yes. She’s a knight who graduated from the military academy with flying colors. She also made a name for herself as a government official, and many people have suggested that she should work directly for the emperor.”

Tia truly was a wildly talented person with an incredibly unfortunate personality. Cleo seemed unsure about me handing such a valuable knight to him.

“Are you really all right with letting go of a knight like that?”

In reality, it was almost like I was dumping her on him. I almost felt bad about it.

“I don’t mind, really. Is there anything else you need?”

There could be no question now that my offer of support was serious, so Cleo

hardened his expression.

“I don’t really want to talk about the future too much right now, but what is it you’re looking to get out of this, Count?”

What did I specifically want from Cleo when he was emperor? I honestly hadn’t thought that far ahead. At the moment, all I cared about was eliminating my “true enemy,” but Cleo would probably be suspicious if I didn’t ask for anything in return. I thought about the future some and came up with a vague reply.

“Well, I want to do what I please in my own territory. As long as you allow me that, I swear to make you emperor.”

Cleo cocked his head. “Is that all? You’re really lending me your strength just for that?”

“Of course. And naturally, I do intend to benefit from this agreement. So let’s work together and have both of us prosper, why don’t we?”

I was never interested in the succession conflict, and I never would have gotten involved if you guys hadn’t forced my hand. But since you’ve messed with me, your luck’s run out. Now you’ve invited a real villain into the palace!

After Liam left, Cleo and Lysithea drank some black tea prepared by their other sister, Cecilia Noah Albareto. The attending palace knights and maids were long gone by now, but Lysithea still seemed uncomfortable.

“Cecilia, I can make tea myself. And I’m Cleo’s underling—we shouldn’t be drinking tea together like this anyway.”

Cleo’s circumstances meant he had very few people in the palace he could trust. Fearing for his safety, Lysithea became a knight and devoted her entire life to protecting him.

Their eldest sister, Cecilia, on the other hand, was a gentle, easygoing sort. Unlike Cleo and Lysithea, she lived a normal life in the palace as an Imperial princess.

“You two are tired after your meeting with the count, aren’t you?” Cecilia

said. "You can at least let me make tea for you. Anyway, how did it go?"

Lysithea shuddered at the question, remembering the chilling way Liam had smiled at her. "The rumors don't do him justice. He could kill me in an instant, I'm sure."

Hearing this, Cecilia gave her younger sister a troubled frown.

"But you didn't meet with him to pick a fight, right? What did you think, Cleo?"

Both sisters turned to look at him.

Cleo responded meekly. "I thought he was dangerous."

Lysithea nodded in agreement. "He avoided your question about repaying him. He's promising all this aid just so he can kick back in his own territory afterward? That's a lie."

Cleo nodded quietly, agreeing with Lysithea's assessment. Asking only that Cleo not meddle in the count's personal affairs in return for the vast aid he was promising didn't really add up.

"I think you're right, but my only option right now is to rely on Count Banfield."

Lysithea hung her head, contemplating the escalating succession conflict. "It's the only way."

The three of them were too vulnerable to survive that conflict without someone else's patronage, and they knew it.

Still, the ever-carefree Cecilia clapped her hands. "I've heard rumors about the count too. They say he's a wise ruler who cares deeply for his people. I'm sure such a kind person will be able to help you, Cleo."

Cleo and Lysithea both smiled fondly at their optimistic sister.

Lysithea shook her head. "I'm sure you're right. For now, we should just celebrate our new ally. Are you all right with that, Cleo?" she asked. She was implying that they shouldn't be overly wary of Liam.

Cleo gave a little nod. "I suppose so."

Chapter 3:

True Villains

HOUSE BANFIELD'S three personal merchants had been summoned to the venerable luxury hotel where Liam currently resided. There was Thomas of the Henfrey Company, who had known Liam the longest; Elliot of the Clave Firm, who did business on the Capital Planet; and Patrice of the Newlands Company, who did business all across the Empire. The three of them were rather anxious after having heard rumors of the economic sanctions soon to be imposed on House Banfield.

Thomas wiped sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. "These sanctions are going to hurt. House Banfield's main export is rare metals. If they can no longer deal in them as before, it will affect my business as well."

Patrice was wearing a suit that exposed her cleavage. Her usual composure was long gone, and she was openly irritated. Sitting tensely with both arms and legs crossed, she drummed her fingers with an annoyance that couldn't be contained. "It's a serious blow for us too. I already have rivals in the Newlands Company who are working against me as it is. This situation couldn't be worse."

In contrast to the other plainly anxious merchants, Elliot remained outwardly calm, though he was still nervous on the inside. "It's the same with Clave. Management is already talking about a change in leadership. And what is Lord Liam thinking, anyway? I mean, siding with Prince Cleo? I wish he would have consulted with us about this beforehand."

None of them knew what to make of Liam's baffling behavior. They didn't say so out loud, but Patrice and Elliot both ached to complain to Liam. Thomas, however, had been acquainted with Liam the longest and felt he understood a little more about what he was thinking.

"Well, Lord Liam may say all sorts of things, but at heart he's a very dutiful person. Perhaps this situation is like the one with Lady Rosetta. He may be acting out of compassion for Prince Cleo's plight."

Patrice scoffed at such a motivation. “Well, he’d better not ruin us out of a sense of moral obligation. Whatever his reasons are, he’s gone too far.”

This time, it wasn’t a noble family like House Berkeley that Liam was up against. He was feuding with a prince with his eye on the Imperial throne. It wouldn’t go the same way as before. Plus, the nobles in Linus’s own faction disapproved of his course of action too. Liam couldn’t do anything against all that opposition on his own.

Elliot’s eyes were cold. “We’ll have to do some serious thinking about this.”

He and Patrice were ready to cut ties with Liam entirely, but Thomas wasn’t.

“I believe Lord Liam has a plan,” Thomas said.

“And what might that be?” Elliot asked, but Thomas wasn’t sure how to answer. Knowing the young count as he did, he was convinced Liam had some sort of scheme, even though he had no idea of its specifics.

“I don’t know, but I’m sure it’s—”

Suddenly, Liam strode into the room where the three of them were waiting. He didn’t look ruffled in the slightest.

“Thanks for coming,” Liam said with a smile.

Patrice and Elliot hurried to paste the artificial smiles of merchants onto their own faces. They couldn’t keep the venom out of their voices entirely, however.

“You seem awfully cheerful, considering the situation we find ourselves in, Lord Liam,” said Patrice.

“You’d never know you were currently feuding with Prince Linus,” said Elliot.

Their bitter words didn’t faze Liam one bit. He interacted with them the same way he always did, without a hint of anger or distress.

“The second prince? Who cares about him?” Liam acted as though the prince was beneath his notice. He then took a seat on the couch.

Thomas spoke up, since the other two didn’t seem capable at the moment. “Lord Liam, we’ve heard your domain is to be subjected to economic sanctions. What is your plan in regard to this?”

“Linus will have to leave the decision-making board,” Liam said.

A chill went down the backs of the three merchants present, and the color had drained from Thomas’s face, but Liam continued smiling.

“I’m going to make Prince Cleo the emperor, and you’re going to help me do it.”

His bold declaration dizzied Thomas. What was Liam even saying? Not only was a mere count presuming that he could decide who the next emperor would be, he was being completely flippant about it. The very notion was completely unrealistic.

“Is that even possible? How are you going to make any money with these sanctions—”

“I have a few ideas. The Empire isn’t the only place I can do business. The universe is vast. I’m sure there are other customers out there.”

When he realized what Liam was suggesting, Thomas’s mouth began wavering like that of a fish. “Y-you mean you plan to sell rare metals to other nations? Th-that’s a serious crime!”

There were strict limitations on the sale of rare metals so that as few of them as possible left the Algrand Empire. Even nobles were punished severely for selling outside the Empire, and several houses that had done so had been mercilessly crushed in the past. Yet here was Liam, saying he planned to do just that, even knowing the risk.

“It’s Prince Linus’s fault for picking a fight with me. I don’t intend to become a criminal though; I’ll just be handling metals and goods that don’t point back to me. It’s not like you have no dealings at all with other nations— isn’t that right, Thomas? Patrice?”

Thomas had traded with all sorts of nations outside the Empire before becoming Liam’s personal merchant and thus had plenty of contacts.

“S-sure, but...there will be problems if these deals become too regular.”

Patrice showed her displeasure as well. “I can’t say I have many contacts myself. It’ll be hard enough just finding customers to deal with. After all, the

Empire's relationship with its neighboring nations isn't exactly friendly."

The Empire had long been in open conflict with its neighboring nations. In fact, relations between them couldn't be worse. Because of this ongoing situation, doing business with neighboring nations could be seen as aiding the enemy. The military would be none too happy about that. They might turn a blind eye to one or two deals, but any regular business between neighboring nations and the Empire's nobility wouldn't escape the military's notice for long.

While Thomas and Patrice deliberated, Elliot smiled instead. "I may just have a lead, Lord Liam."

"Oh? You seem motivated, Elliot." Liam turned toward him and urged him to continue.

Elliot explained a rumor he picked up on the Capital Planet. "I heard this from a noble inside the palace, so I believe it's trustworthy information. Apparently, there's been some strife amongst the nations on the Empire's borders."

"Go on," Liam urged, and Elliot continued.

"They're gathering up supplies, and people who normally would never think to deal with Imperial merchants have asked the Empire, their enemy, for assistance. They're getting very nervous about something."

So, this unnamed strife was turning other nations to desperation, and the higher powers of the Empire were aware of it. Liam realized part of the reason Calvin and Linus were able to indulge in such a fierce competition right now was *because* the Empire's troubled enemies couldn't make any big moves at this time.

"What's the Imperial Army doing?"

"They're not providing assistance, but they're not attacking either. People are trying to figure out what's going on right now, but there's not a lot of information."

As Thomas listened to Elliot, he formulated some thoughts of his own on the matter.

And there it is. Sometimes it almost seems like heaven itself is on Lord Liam's

side. We're faced with a terrible economic situation, but there's strife in the Empire's neighboring nations and a need for materials. It's like destiny.

Under other circumstances, the sanctions might have proved the end for Liam, but it was as if some great force was working toward providing him with victory here.

Liam was very curious about the mysterious situation in the Empire's rival nations. "I want you three to make contact with some of these other nations and find out what's going on. Let's get some supplies ready to sell them."

Patrice smiled, having made some mental calculations while Liam was speaking. She seemed to be enjoying this new situation, sure that she would be able to profit from it. "I'll make up a list for you later, but first, could I ask for some assistance from you, Lord Liam?"

"You need my help?"

"We need protection," she said. "A few hundred ships should do."

In contrast to Patrice's excitement, Elliot seemed rather disappointed. "Well, I have no contacts outside the Empire. I can help you prepare your exports, but... Hmm. I could actually use some personal protection myself. I'm afraid of what the people at the top of my firm will do."

Liam understood the situations Patrice and Elliot were in, so he quickly agreed. "Very well. Thomas? Do you need protection as well?"

"If you wouldn't mind."

"Of course. I'd be in big trouble if you died!" With that, Liam left to meet with the military leaders of House Banfield.

The other three remained to talk about making money.

Much more motivated now than he had been earlier, Elliot went over the supplies they should gather. "If we can't sell rare metals, we'll need other types of exports. We should gather up as many materials and goods as we can think to sell."

Patrice was fired up about the deals she was going to make. "I'll take care of these clients."

“You have some idea of who to approach?”

“Well, it’s just me and Thomas leaving the country, so you can leave finding clients to me.”

“As long as we can make money, I don’t care who we deal with,” Elliot said.

Thomas joined their enthusiastic conversation. “I’ll talk to the people I’ve dealt with in the past. This situation really came out of nowhere, though, didn’t it? It’s kind of unsettling.”

Conflict amongst the Empire’s neighboring nations wasn’t anything new, but when it developed within all of them at once, it began to feel suspicious.

Patrice ignored Thomas’s apprehensions, staying focused on how to make money. “Unrest in other nations means domains on the outskirts and the army details that maintain the Empire’s borders must be getting nervous too. They’ll be wanting to stock up on supplies as well.”

Elliot agreed with Patrice’s logic and nodded. “Plenty of merchants will try selling goods to those people at high prices. If we come to them with more reasonable prices—”

“Then they’ll happily deal with us.”

If they sold supplies at fair rates, then anyone would readily deal with House Banfield, economic sanctions be damned. The trio’s noses told them this was a good opportunity. At the same time, they all had their backs against the wall. If Liam lost here, then the rest of them would go down as well. They had to make it out of this situation unscathed and turn misfortune into victory. There was still hope.

Thomas saw the two other merchants were getting ahead of themselves and cautioned them. “Just make sure you don’t do anything to incur Lord Liam’s disapproval. He’s a very moral person, despite appearances. If you’re so focused on profit that you deal with unlawful types, you’ll end up getting on Lord Liam’s bad side.”

Patrice hastened to agree. “O-of course. I’ll be sure to be careful of that.”

Elliot did the same. “No, naturally we can’t deal with the wrong people simply

out of a desire for profit.”

They knew Liam understood the perspective of merchants, who prioritized profit above all else, but at the same time, he was an upstanding person. If they went about their business the wrong way, they wouldn’t be exempt from Liam’s ire. Both of them very much wanted to avoid earning that anger, so they respected Thomas’s advice as he had known Liam the longest.

“First, we have to figure out exactly what the situation *is* in these other nations,” Patrice said.

Elliot agreed. “I’ll provide support for whoever you two choose to deal with, so please choose wisely.”

In other words, he was telling them, “*A heavy responsibility lies on your shoulders.*”

Patrice gave Elliot a confident smile. “Don’t worry, just get the goods ready. But remember, since you’re the one who’ll be remaining here on the Capital Planet, you’ll be in the most danger.”

Elliot understood that. “Yeah, I’m aware. If I call too much attention to myself, Prince Linus might take notice.”

If Elliot’s Clave Firm acted too conspicuously, Linus was sure to hear about it. Even if they weren’t breaking any laws, Linus wouldn’t like Liam making big profits, and there was a good chance he’d take some sort of action against Liam or Elliot. Still, even knowing that he might end up assassinated, Elliot kept his cool.

“I appreciate your concern,” he said. “I’m still a little nervous about the situation with Prince Cleo, but I do think things should go well with these other nations, at least.”

Patrice was excited at the prospect of making some new contacts during this endeavor. “We’ll be set no matter what happens if we make some strong connections outside the Empire. I’m going to make sure *I’m* taken care of, at least.”

If things went bad for Liam, she could simply leave the country and relocate somewhere else.

In contrast to the other two who were feeling optimistic, Thomas was experiencing some anxiety.

“You two are fearless, aren’t you? I’m so worried, my stomach hurts,” he said.

Patrice and Elliot exchanged a glance, then laughed.

Surprised, Thomas asked, “What’s so funny?”

Hiding her mouth with her hand, Patrice said, “You’re far too honest for a merchant, Mr. Henfrey.”

“Huh?”

Elliot teased Thomas, with some degree of envy, “You made the right decision becoming Lord Liam’s personal merchant. Anyone else would be taking advantage of you.”

Returning to my room, I sat down on the couch and thought about Cleo.

“Tougher guy than I was expecting...”

Before meeting with him, I expected Prince Cleo to be a fainthearted rich kid, and that it would take time to convince him to do things my way. When I’d told him I was certain I could make him the emperor, however, he accepted my offer immediately despite his initial surprise. I thought I would meet much more resistance. I was surprised myself, in a good way, by his attitude.

I reflected on his androgynous good looks, owing to his formerly having been a girl. If he hadn’t been introduced to me as a man beforehand, I have to admit I might have questioned it. He still had a slight build too—perhaps a defect of a procedure he’d undergone? Maybe this world’s technologies in that area weren’t as flawless as I thought they were.

While I was ruminating on this, the door opened, and Rosetta entered my room.

“Darling, I heard Prince Linus is putting pressure on House Banfield! Is that true?”

Rosetta had obviously heard about the economic sanctions and rushed here

to confirm it. In her anxiousness, she was a bit out of breath.

I once thought of her as a steel-willed woman, so it pained me these days to see her so head over heels for me. Was she that “tsundere” type that I’d heard so much about from Nitta? My heart ached with embarrassment when I saw her act like that.

“It’s not a problem,” I answered curtly. I lay down on the couch and turned away from her, but she just rushed over and started shaking me.

“It’s a *big* problem! House Banfield gets all of its money from trading rare metals, doesn’t it? It’ll be terrible if we can’t do that anymore!”

Actually, it was kind of fun seeing Rosetta freak out about potential peril to House Banfield. It tickled my desire to tease her, so I said, “I suppose you’re right. If we can’t sell our rare metals anymore, we’ll just have to hold on to them and live in poverty for a while. Maybe it’s time to cut your ties to me and flee.”

In response to my test of her devotion, Rosetta gave me an earnest look without a hint of deception in her eyes. “I’ll stay with you no matter what, Darling. I’ll support you even if you can’t make any money at all! It’ll be fine. I’m used to poverty.”

She said this with a blinding smile, meant to reassure me.

Well, that wasn’t the response I was looking for... What a joke of a love interest, really.

Already bored with teasing her, I explained the situation instead. “I’m kidding. I’m not hurting for business partners. If I have to, I’ll just sell outside the Empire.”

“Outside the Empire? Won’t you get in trouble with the law if you do that?”

“Prince Linus is the one who started this trouble, and he’s gonna have to pay for that. Anyway, rare metals aren’t our only resource.”

“You mean...?”

“We’ll make *less* money, sure, but it won’t be a problem.”

I still had my trump card—the alchemy box. If the Empire was going to control

the distribution of rare metals, then I'd use that mysterious artifact to mass-produce other things, instead. And if they tried to restrict me from selling *those*, there were still other methods I could use to generate money. Those alternatives didn't stand out because we made so much money selling rare metals, but House Banfield had other businesses that were profitable enough. Even without our rare metals, we were doing fine for a count's territory. All our eggs weren't in one basket.

"This is actually a good opportunity to make some connections outside the Empire," I told her.

I smiled confidently, and Rosetta sat down beside me on the couch.

"I've heard Imperial nobles don't like it when you're friendly with other nations. I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"I'm just going to ally myself with whoever will be most beneficial to me, no matter our official allegiances."

Rosetta looked stunned by my words.

Guess that was too much for Little Miss Diligent. If she's surprised by that, she's not gonna make it as an evil lord's wife. Huh, wait... I get the feeling she has the wrong idea about me. Maybe I should take this opportunity to show her my more villainous side.

"Remember this, Rosetta. True villains join hands with their enemies and kill their allies."

Rosetta was so shocked by my statement that she couldn't say anything in return. Hopefully that gave her a better idea of my true nature. It was true though—I didn't care if I ended up undermining the Empire. I was after my own happiness above all else! And for that, I'd join hands with the Empire's enemies as much as I had to.

After leaving Liam's room, Rosetta walked down the hallway by herself, back to her own room. With her expression grave, she muttered, "True villains... What did he mean by that?"

Just who were the “true villains” Liam referred to? He had chosen not to specifically name them, so she didn’t feel like she could ask him. This was something she had to figure out on her own, she reasoned.

“Was he calling *himself* a villain? No, that can’t be it...”

Liam liked to *act* villainous, but Rosetta knew he was a good person at heart. She wanted to believe that he wouldn’t call himself a “true villain,” No way. It was more likely that these “true villains” he spoke of infuriated him.

Rosetta thought about Liam’s actions to date. He had spurned the invitations of the two top candidates to become the next emperor and declared his support for a prince who was in a much less advantageous position. Such actions would be unthinkable for anyone else, so Rosetta could only wonder what his reasoning had been for those decisions.

Liam already wielded a lot of influence in the Empire. If he had joined Calvin’s or Linus’s faction, he might have become the deciding factor that would lead to their victory. Calvin was the favored candidate right now, but there were a lot of nobles in Linus’s faction as well. Both of them had wanted Liam’s support—Calvin to slow Linus’s progress, and Linus to catch up to Calvin.

“Darling is an influential noble, so both of them would have treated him well to get him on their side. However, he turned them both down and decided to support the third prince instead, so...”

Liam’s actions were incomprehensible to Rosetta, though she knew there must’ve been something deeper there.

“Could it be that Prince Calvin and Prince Linus are colluding with Darling’s enemies?”

Liam was moving proactively and independently to make connections with foreign powers right now. Did he have some information Rosetta wasn’t aware of? Perhaps he wasn’t telling her about it because it might put her in danger if she knew too much. That possibility made a chill run down Rosetta’s spine.

“Could it be the so-called darkness of the Empire? When Darling...said true villains join hands with their enemies and kill their allies, did he mean one of those princes? It’s so curious...”

It seemed to Rosetta that one of the two princes must've had an illicit connection with an enemy nation and was using that relationship to undermine the Empire and win the throne. The color drained from Rosetta's face when she contemplated such dark machinations.

While Rosetta stood there in a troubled state, Marie approached her.

"There you are, Lady Rosetta."

"Marie? Oh, you're back." Rosetta turned and put on a brave face for her.

"I'll be leaving the Empire for a while on Lord Liam's orders, so I thought I'd come say goodbye before I left... Ah, is something the matter, my lady?"

Despite Rosetta's efforts to hide it, Marie had noticed that something was bothering Rosetta.

"You see right through me, Marie."

"I'd be happy to give whatever counsel I might."

Marie was always kind to Rosetta, so Rosetta had come to rely on her.

"Where are you heading that's outside the Empire, Marie?"

Marie was thrown off by Rosetta changing the subject, and she wasn't sure she should be discussing the mission with her. After a few seconds, however, she decided to tell Rosetta what she'd been ordered to do.

"I'm being dispatched to Rustwarr to guard some merchants who are heading to the Union," she said.

The mission assigned to Marie was to guard Patrice and her team on their way to the Intergalactic Rustwarr Union. Patrice would be in charge of a group of merchant ships while Marie and her unit would provide them security.

"The Union? But they're at war with the Empire, aren't they?"

"Right. They don't appreciate the Imperial Army over there, so we'll disguise ourselves as mercenaries."

Marie smiled self-consciously, imagining the alarm it would cause in the Union to enter their territory undisguised.

Rosetta pressed Marie for more details. "Have you heard anything else?"

Marie was getting a little uncomfortable by her questions, but she couldn't deny a request from Rosetta.

"I haven't heard anything directly, but apparently Lord Liam wants to make some personal connections within the Union. I've been ordered to meet with any important people myself. Also, there seems to be some internal strife within the Union at the moment, so investigating that is part of our mission."

Rosetta felt like she was putting things together now.

Strife within our neighboring nations? Darling is so worried about this that he's sending Marie to look into it personally?

She may have been stripped of her title, but until recently, Marie had been House Banfield's second-highest knight after Tia. Sending her was proof that Liam felt very strongly about this mission.

Rosetta fell silent as she mulled over this information, causing Marie to worry. Once again, she asked, "Is something the matter, Lady Rosetta?"

Rosetta gave her a solemn look. "There's something I'd like you to do for me, Marie."

"Something you'd like me to do?"

"I'd like you to see if you can find out if the Empire has anything to do with what's happening in our neighboring nations. If you need funds, I can provide them from what money I have access to, so please do this for me."

Marie was a little surprised at just how serious Rosetta looked as she asked this favor. She smiled reassuringly. "You have some suspicions? Very well, Lady Rosetta—leave it to me."

Relieved that Marie was willing to do that for her, Rosetta embraced the other woman gratefully.

"Thank you, Marie!"



Marie gently wrapped her arms around Rosetta's back.

"You really are just like her, Lady Rosetta... Your ancestor."

"Former Special Staff Officer, you idiooooooot!"

In the communications room, one could contact other people over long distances. Intergalactic nations were vast, so people were often not within range of simple tablet-to-tablet calls. For that reason, special communications rooms that enabled such long-distance exchanges were necessary.

Scolding me from the monitor in front of me was Wallace's older brother, Cedric. He was royalty, but he made his living in the military and was currently a major general in command of a few thousand ships. I'd made good use of him as a minion of mine during my time in the military.

I had resigned myself to taking a scolding from him because it had gotten out that he was in my faction. In other words, he'd been drawn into the succession conflict now, even though that hadn't been my intention.

"I'm sorry. By way of apology, I'll send you a cutting-edge ship. Forgive me, okay?"

Cedric's expression lightened as soon as he heard that, but then he quickly shook his head. *"No, that won't cut it! I never wanted to get involved with all that court drama! Now things are getting really awkward for me in the military!"*

Cedric had a great position now in the regular army, but his situation had changed since I'd decided to back Cleo. The people around him now looked at him as a nuisance since they didn't want to get involved in the succession conflict themselves. One would think people would want to get on a member of the royal family's good side, but things were different in the Empire with the race to the throne. If you got too close to someone on the losing end, you could get sucked in yourself and lose your life because of it. Hence, people didn't want to get too close to Imperial royals at a time like this.

"And why Cleo? He's got no chance! If you wanted to help him, there were

other things you could have done, weren't there? Like get him off the Capital Planet in secret or something!"

"There'd be no point to that. I've decided I'm gonna make him emperor."

That'd benefit me more, after all. Not to mention the facts that the emperor and the other princes *might* be my enemies, and that Linus already was.

"That's just not happening!"

"There's nowhere for Cleo to run anymore, Cedric. Just do what I say and manage your fleet. I'll give you enough funding and some state-of-the-art weaponry, all right?"

Though he still seemed worried, Cedric reluctantly accepted my offer of logistical support.

"I'm sure I can get my men behind me if you'll give us all that... You have to understand though, I only have 1,000 ships at my disposal. I won't be much help to you."

True, 1,000 ships weren't enough to face the threats at hand. That simply meant he needed more.

"Not a problem. I'll get you promoted soon enough."

Cedric was quick to protest. *"Don't do that! People are jealous! Let me get ahead on my own achievements! Everyone will resent me if I get promoted because of your influence!"*

Well, at least he was motivated to get ahead. That was a good thing.

"It's your lucky day, then. I've got a job for you that'll win you plenty of achievements."

"Huh?"

There was no point in a weapon that didn't get used. If Cedric was going to stagnate in the regular army because no one wanted to deal with him, I'd pull him out and put him somewhere else.

"You see, a lot of domains will be requesting that Cleo do something to eliminate pirates. There are too many of them plaguing the Empire for even my

fleet to handle. So...why don't you make your brother look good and get to work on those?"

"Huh?"

"I want you to make me a list of whatever you think you'll need, and I'll throw in an extra thousand ships too. A lot of people like you aren't being treated right by the military, and I've already been able to round up quite a few of them."

The Empire just had so many weaknesses to exploit! As vast as intergalactic nations tended to be, they were impossible to manage perfectly and were therefore full of holes. One of these glaring issues was that people of skill were underutilized, and I had experience putting such people to use myself, as with my patrol fleet.

"I've already told the commanders I know in the army about you. Trust me, you can rely on them for any resupply you'll need."

A yearly bribe—excuse me, *gift*—made all the difference, and everyone who received my gifts was quite happy.

"Wait a—"

I cut my call with Cedric and gleefully went on to consider my next move.

"Now, what villainy can I stain my hands with next?"

It's so much fun to be an evil lord!

Back in House Banfield's domain, a trembling Brian read over a report with Serena, the head maid.

"He wants us to mobilize our army in addition to devoting our efforts to expanding our territory?"

House Banfield was very busy at the moment developing new planets they acquired. They'd started settling them as well, so vast amounts of money, people, and resources were being devoted to those projects. Now, with all that going on, they also received orders to mobilize the majority of their army. Thirty thousand active ships were being deployed, and the only ships that would

remain would be those that were absolutely necessary for the protection of Liam's domain or were currently being reorganized or retrained.

Serena was just as surprised. "He's throwing punches pretty wildly right now. One mishap could end it all."

If Liam made even one mistake, everything around him could crumble, and that could result in the end of House Banfield.

"Master Liam! Why did you not consult with me?!" Brian wailed.

Amused, Serena grinned. "Even if he had, we couldn't have stopped him. He's really gambling here, but if this works, we'll see what Prince Cleo is capable of too."

What before had seemed an impossibility had just inched toward something more hopeful. Serena could see that Liam was serious about making Cleo the emperor, but that still didn't mean a thing to Brian.

"Why does he always operate at such extremes?! Well, that's our Master Liam...and at least he hasn't put the burden on his citizenry."

Had he wanted to, Liam could have mobilized his entire citizenry to support his aims, but he hadn't done that. That seemed like a kindness to Brian.

Serena shook her head. "True, he's a softy, but I can't fault him for it. I wonder what his interest is in our neighboring nations though. You haven't heard anything, have you, Brian?"

"Nothing. As long as he's not trading rare metals with them, it's not a crime, so I don't think there will be any problems."

"Right. As long as he stays away from that..." Serena trailed off, seeming a bit concerned about that possibility.

Brian smiled. "I've seen the list of things he intends to trade instead, and it all looked aboveboard. You don't need to be worried."

"I hope you're right about that."

Chapter 4:

Other Intergalactic Nations

AT A SPACEPORT belonging to the Intergalactic Rustwarr Union, a Union Army fleet was supplementing the usual defenses. A group of large ships transporting goods, led by Patrice, had just arrived at the spaceport. They were accompanied by heavy security in the form of mercenary ships.

The spaceport was a secret one belonging to the Union, hidden inside an asteroid that had previously been mined for material. Within this fortress-like shell was a habitable environment, but from the exterior the asteroid looked abandoned and unremarkable. This port was used for top-secret meetings and other such important matters, but in a way, it was also a cage used to secure important people visiting from other nations.

Patrice's small luxury ship followed an escort ship into the asteroid. An illuminated line had been projected in space, marking a path for the ship to navigate along.

Watching out a window, she turned to Marie, who was seated beside her. "I didn't think we'd be doing business dealings inside a fortress."

Marie sat with her legs crossed, reading over some top-secret information about the Union on the tablet in her hand. Patrice wasn't sure what particular details the woman was studying, but Marie seemed intent on being well-informed about the Union.

"They don't want to negotiate with us at all, I'm sure," Marie said. "The Union has never liked the Empire's nobility system."

"Makes sense, with them being a democracy run by civilians. Our systems are incompatible."

The Union was an extensive collection of democratic planets that had come together to form one enormous intergalactic nation.

Marie sneered. "They're nothing more than a collection of rabble. They may

call themselves a Union, but only a handful of people on the more developed planets hold all the power.”

“You seem to know a lot about them.”

“They decry the nobility system, but with all their internal power struggles, they’ll happily go to war with other nations or even amongst themselves. Nothing’s changed between then and now.”

“Then?”

Marie was still examining the data on her tablet, but she seemed to already know a great deal about the Union. That made Patrice curious. Marie closed the documents she was reading and then showed Patrice the tablet’s screen, which showed some current news from the Union.

“I’ve read some recent news articles, and nothing has changed at all from how it used to be. They criticize hereditary systems, but the majority of politicians in the Union do come from politician families themselves.”

Patrice scanned the article and found a long list of politician families whose members had been elected again and again for generations, backing up Marie’s statement. The satirical tone of the article made it clear that at least the people had enough freedom in the Union to say what they liked.

Still, Patrice found herself muttering, “They are just like nobles.”

As she watched Marie, Patrice mentally thanked Liam for having provided the knight as her guard. *I have no complaints about her abilities, and she’s knowledgeable about the inner workings of the Union to boot.*

Grateful that Liam had thoughtfully sent the best person for the job, Patrice continued her conversation with Marie.

“I’m still surprised they wanted to use a top-secret fortress for mere business dealings. Are things that tense here?”

As she continued to peruse the news articles on her tablet, Marie said, “The Union has plenty of fortresses like this. They don’t care if knowledge of one of them gets out.”

Patrice looked back out the window. A powerful light source not unlike a

miniature sun was suspended inside the asteroid's hollowed-out core. The buildings all pointed up toward the high, solid ceiling of this central space, making the asteroid seem all the more closed off.

Well, let's see how these negotiations go.

In a VIP room within the fortress, Union politicians, high-ranking government bureaucrats, and military officers were waiting. The soldiers were unfriendly and gruff, but one of the bureaucrats held out a hand to Patrice with a smile.

"You must be Ms. Patrice from the Newlands Company. Thank you for coming."

Patrice shook his hand and smiled in return. "Thanks for having me."

Patrice took a seat at the long table, and Marie assumed a standing position behind her. Several soldiers from the Union Army stood along the wall in a similar manner, glaring at Patrice and Marie.

I see we're not very welcome.

From the perspective of the Union's government, the Empire's nobility system was an anachronistic way to run a nation. More importantly, there had been lengthy military hostilities between the two nations. The politicians and bureaucrats may have met Patrice with smiles, but she was sure they were deeply bitter on the inside.

The bureaucrat who had greeted Patrice earlier got the meeting started. "I hate to cut to the chase, but let's discuss this deal, shall we?"

"That's fine with me."

The military officers all wore scowls, unhappy with the fact that they were even considering a deal with the enemy. Knowing how irritated the military was, the bureaucrats probably didn't want to let the meeting drag on too long and were trying to get things sorted quickly. Patrice frankly had no complaints about that either.

The bureaucrat projected a holographic list before her. "These are the items we wish to purchase from you."

“That’s quite a lot,” she said.

“Well, we have our circumstances. We’re looking to make an ongoing deal here.”

“Ongoing, you say?”

“Yes. That’s not a bad arrangement for you either, is it? I should think it would benefit you to have regular dealings with the Union government.”

The bureaucrat was a bit arrogant, no doubt thinking that Patrice would jump at such an opportunity. It was also true that it wasn’t a bad arrangement for her. If there had been no other circumstances to take into consideration, she would probably be talking conditions with them already. Right now, however, a rather frightening person stood just behind her, as Marie worked directly for Liam and was keeping a close eye on the woman.

“Why don’t we put that discussion on hold for a moment?” Patrice said.

“On hold? What do you mean? We’re telling you that we plan on making steady purchases of large amounts of goods from your company.”

Patrice grumbled internally to the bureaucrat’s incredulity. *I want to get this over with as quickly as you do!*

Thomas’s words about getting on Liam’s bad side for dealing with unlawful types returned to Patrice’s mind.

“I don’t suppose you could tell me what exactly is going on within the Union right now...?”

Her simple question wiped the fake smiles off of the politicians’ and bureaucrats’ faces.

“May I ask why you wish to know?” the bureaucrat said. His voice was much darker than it had been previously.

Patrice was still smiling. “Well, it was Count Banfield who prepared the goods I plan to sell, and the count does not wish to side with the unjust.”

In response to this, a military general with a chest full of medals slammed his fist down on the table loudly.

“How dare you?!” the man shouted. Marie took a step toward him at that, causing the soldiers along the wall to move to draw their weapons. Negotiations were on the verge of breaking down and then some, but the bureaucrat hurriedly stood and tried to clear the air.

“W-wait a second!” he said, to placate the military personnel. “I’m sorry about that, but they don’t fully understand the situation yet.”

The other bureaucrats chimed in to keep the openly hostile soldiers in check.

Patrice was relieved that things hadn’t broken down completely. “Thank you,” she said.

Their army really is unhappy about this.

The bureaucrat shook his head weakly and sat back down to begin a simple explanation of the situation to Patrice. He projected several documents and holographic images between the two of them.

“The situation started with an independence movement.”

“What do you mean?”

“A number of planets that make up the Union wish to leave and form their own intergalactic nation.”

Such independence movements weren’t rare even within the Empire, so it was unsurprising that they occurred in the Union as well.

“Did you quell it immediately?”

Any domain that tried to secede from the Empire was swiftly subjugated, and sometimes entire planets were wiped out. However, it seemed that wasn’t the case in the Union.

One of the politicians scoffed at Patrice’s words. “Your Empire is a bunch of savages if you move straight to military action at the first hint of opposition.”

The bureaucrat apologized to Patrice for the politician’s comment. “I’m sorry, that was uncalled for.”

“It’s all right.”

“It is true that we don’t resort to military force immediately when a planet

declares independence from the Union.” The bureaucrat tried to explain the unique challenges of this particular independence movement to Patrice. “If the movement is the plan of a dictator, we would suppress it quickly, but if the *people* move democratically to secede, all we can do is acknowledge their decision.”

If this were a matter that could be solved with their military, the Union would have already done so, but since it was a decision that had been reached democratically, there was nothing that could be done, per Union policy.

Patrice considered that. “It is quite different here than in the Empire.”

“But if that was all that was happening, there would be no major problem. The issue is that the planets that wish to secede have formed an alliance, and that alliance has declared war against the Union.”

Patrice stared at the documents in front of her and noticed something interesting. All the worlds that had seceded from the Union had been powerless within the Union’s government. It was a gathering of small administrations that were *formally* part of the Union, but they held no real authority within it. Even banded together, they shouldn’t have had the military strength to declare war against the Union so fast.

Is someone backing them?

When Patrice hit upon that idea, she realized the bureaucrat was soberly watching her face for a reaction.

He said, “The fighting units they possess are disguised, but they’re Empire-made.”

Studying the images projected in front of her, Patrice quickly recognized the ships and mobile knights to be the work of an Imperial weapons factory.

These here look like they were made by the First Weapons Factory. The Second’s involved too. And they’re all new models!

The First and Second Weapons Factories had formerly been allied with House Berkeley, but House Berkeley had been destroyed by Liam. The fact that brand-new ships created by those factories were in use by this alliance of rebels was extremely unusual.

If they're handing over new ships like that, they've got to be coming from someone pretty high up in the Empire.

While Patrice considered who might be supporting this new alliance, she criticized the bureaucrat for what he seemed to be implying. "So you think the Empire is supporting your enemies? Now, I understand why you're all so on edge, but taking it out on me won't solve anything. I'm just a merchant, but I can assure you the person behind me, Count Banfield, is most definitely *not* supporting the Union's enemies."

For the moment, the bureaucrat seemed to accept her assertion. "I apologize. In any case, the issue here is how spread-out this independence movement is. The Union Army is having to devote too many of its forces to simply observe the situation—forget moving them effectively."

So, the Union Army was too preoccupied watching their enemies gather state-of-the-art weaponry to properly monitor their outer regions.

"Do you have any information on who exactly is supporting your opponents?" Patrice asked frankly.

The bureaucrat seemed a little reluctant to come right out with it. "This is unconfirmed, but...we believe it's the Empire's Prince Linus. To be more precise, we believe someone connected to the prince is involved."

"The second prince? I'm surprised you even agreed to meet with me, then."

With the Empire apparently causing internal strife in the Union, why were they even attempting to rely on Patrice's company?

The bureaucrat smiled faintly. "You said it was Count Banfield who stands behind you, correct? The Union has taken a certain interest in him."

Not only was Liam making a name for himself within the Empire, but even other nations were taking notice of him now. That must have meant that they were aware of his opposition to Linus as well.

"You knew that Count Banfield opposes Prince Linus from the start, didn't you?"

"I hope you weren't underestimating our information network. Now, should

we get back to business?”

“Of course,” Patrice said. She felt herself sweating a little.

I guess we're not exactly ahead of the Union when it comes to intel. That's not a good thing.

While Patrice handled the business dealings, Marie left the merchant's protection to some of her subordinates and exited the room. She headed down the hallway with her eyes open wide, blazing with excitement at the conversation she'd just heard.

“So *this* is what Lady Rosetta was worried about. Lord Liam's command of the situation is practically supernatural, as usual.”

Immediately after antagonizing Linus, Liam had been able to gain information he could use against the man. Liam's insight into the situation could almost be dismissed as sheer luck, but that was what made it so impressive.

“The very universe wishes for Lord Liam's success. I knew he was the one...”

She entered a bathroom to touch up her makeup, finding a female guard of a Union bigwig inside. Wearing a black suit and sunglasses, the woman smirked when she saw Marie. The woman's form then dissolved into a thick liquid and reshaped itself, reverting to the individual's true appearance—as one of Kukuri's masked operatives.

Marie narrowed her eyes at this member of House Banfield's dark ops team. “Well?”

Kukuri's underling snickered and reported, “It's true that they've taken notice of Master Liam, but only very recently. They were actually after information on Linus when Master Liam's name came up.”

“So they were bluffing.”

“They have no detailed information on House Banfield.”

“Then their initial hostility wasn't acting. It was genuine.”

The bureaucrat's assertion that they'd had their eye on Liam had been a lie.

Marie clicked her tongue and asked the spy, “What did you find out about the Union’s goals?”

“It’s true that they’re in need of supplies. Several of their long-distance warp gates have been destroyed and they’re having trouble resupplying adequately.”

“Anything else?”

“That’s all the info this guard had,” the spy said, referring to the person he had eliminated and taken the place of. “I’ll be looking into more details.”

“We cannot allow Lord Liam to be used,” Marie told Kukuri’s man. “Continue collecting information and get some dirt on the Union.”

The man changed his appearance back to that of the female guard. “Of course.”

The undercover spy left the bathroom to head back to his post.

Marie smiled. “The Union will dance in the palm of Lord Liam’s hand.”

The United Kingdom of Oxys was another intergalactic nation that, like the Algrand Empire, used a nobility system. If there was a difference between the two, it was that the United Kingdom was actually a collection of several nations with their own nobility systems. Each nation had its own ruling monarch, and they all met in an assembly to decide on the policies of the collective.

Thomas was presently meeting with a noble in one of the nations that belonged to this collective.

The noble, an old business partner of Thomas’s, sat in his office smoking a pipe-shaped hookah. In exchange for a hefty donation, he was sharing all sorts of inside information on the United Kingdom with Thomas, and the man didn’t seem to feel the least bit guilty about it.

“Prince Linus is supporting several nations within the United Kingdom. He’s made a secret deal to hand over some undeveloped territory on the Empire’s border if he becomes emperor.”

“A secret deal?”

Thomas reacted with surprise, but the idea wasn't all that strange to him. The Empire's territory was vast, and it wouldn't hurt Linus one bit to give up a tiny amount of it. In fact, it was a small price to pay if such a deal helped him become emperor.

The noble exhaled some smoke, which then morphed into the form of a bird and flew off. His pipe allowed him to shape and control the smoke he blew out. As the smoke bird struck a wall and dissipated, the noble continued.

"Those who made the deal with Prince Linus are gaining power within the United Kingdom. And as a result, all sorts of skirmishes are breaking out, so everyone's trying to gather the supplies they'll need for the conflict. You should come do business with us too. You'll sell to me cheap, right, old friend?"

It was a fair price for the information, Thomas decided. He nodded and asked for more details. "Do you know who exactly made this deal with Prince Linus?"

"Of course. My lord is one of them."

Thomas was speechless for a moment to learn that this noble's own king was in on the deal with Linus. "A-and what about you?"

Was he one of Linus's co-conspirators too? However, the noble laughed in an effort to allay the merchant's fears.

"Hey, I'm not the nation. I'm just an individual noble. The king might be colluding with Prince Linus, but I'm not."

Still, Thomas couldn't trust the man's words. This noble might pretend to play along with Thomas for now only to stab him in the back later. In fact, the reason Thomas had stopped dealing with him in the past was because he'd decided the man wasn't trustworthy enough.

"I'm relieved to hear it," Thomas said, hiding his true feelings.

The noble continued on in a good mood. "So in effect, our nation supports Prince Linus. After all, if he succeeds we'll get some of that border territory out of it, and that would benefit the whole of the United Kingdom as well."

Thomas disliked that the man was framing the situation as good for the collective nation. *This deal with Prince Linus is a divisive issue. If he was actually*

thinking of the good of the United Kingdom, he would see the skirmishes between its nations as a bad thing. Maybe this noble wasn't colluding with Linus himself, but he was obviously sitting back and waiting to take advantage of the circumstances he found himself in.

The noble cocked his head curiously. "It's a little strange lately, however."

"Strange?"

"Things never used to get this violent, not even with Empire involvement. The timing is part of it, but it feels like things won't end in mere skirmishes this time. It's getting rather stressful."

Thomas fell into thought. *Is there something else at work here?*

The noble cleared his throat, getting back to matters of business. "Anyway, thanks to all the upheaval, things are hard for us financially right now. I hope we can count on your support from here on out. In fact, why not just become the personal merchants for our house?"

In response to the man's invitation, Thomas tried desperately to maintain his merchant's smile. If he let his concentration slip, his lips might turn into a grimace in a second.

"That would be difficult, considering the backing we currently receive from House Banfield."

If the Henfrey Company became your personal merchants, we'd simply be used up and thrown away in no time.

Staring at the man across from him, Thomas felt an even greater appreciation of his relationship with Liam.

While attending a school lecture, I watched Wallace out of the corner of my eye. He was looking more haggard by the day, owing to his increased drinking since I'd decided to support his brother Cleo.

"You may have undergone physical strengthening," I advised him, "but you'll still wreck yourself if you take things too far, man."

Things I could only have dreamed of in my past life were real here, including

incredible medicines. There were instant hangover cures, and a person could bathe in alcohol every night and be fine come the next morning. Most people didn't even suffer adverse effects from drinking since they had artificially strengthened physiques. A little bit of alcohol wouldn't affect them at all. If Wallace was wasting away, it was because he was drinking an extreme amount, and this was causing some psychological issues as well.

"Just leave me alone. I'm gonna be killed soon anyway. Assassins will be after me, and when I'm erased, they'll say it was an illness. Heh heh... It's the fate of too many royals."

His pessimism was really starting to piss me off. "I've got guards on you. Just calm down already."

"The Imperial family's sordid history is a long one. Do you know how many assassin organizations have popped up throughout that history? There are people you can't guard against just because you're strong, Liam."

Those assassins sure came about for a nasty reason... He was right, however—there was no harm in being ready. I decided to spend more money on my personal protection.

While trying to reassure the despondent Wallace I received an emergency communication. I checked my tablet under my lecture hall desk and found reports from Thomas and Patrice, who were still on their business trips to foreign nations. A report had come in from Marie too.

Thomas had found out that skirmishes underway within the United Kingdom of Oxys were all because of Linus. *That Linus is a real evildoer like me.* There was something else about the report that intrigued me. Thomas had gotten his information from a sketchy noble working behind his monarch's back, selling his peers out without a shred of remorse. *I like the sound of this traitor! I'll tell Thomas to keep up his relationship with him.* We couldn't support him directly though. For now, we'd have to work with a more respectable type, one whose nation wasn't in a deal with Linus.

Patrice's report indicated that in the Intergalactic Rustwarr Union, Linus was supporting an independence movement. *Man, this guy really has his fingers in all kinds of pies.* It was beneficial to the Empire to support worlds that wished to

become independent, since it threw the Union into turmoil. However, since I was Linus's enemy, I would have to support the Union. *Heh—I'm so bad.* This was for my own selfish reasons, with no regard for what benefited the Empire at all. I really was starting to shape up as an evil lord.

Finally, I read Marie's report and found myself rolling my eyes with irritation at its nonsensical conclusions.

"Who told her to report supernatural bullshit to me?"

Marie stated that she couldn't believe all the strife in these neighboring nations was because of any Empire influence. It wasn't rare for various intergalactic nations to interfere with one another as it had happened countless times in the past. She asserted that this time, things were different. To Marie, it seemed like something much bigger than Linus was pulling the strings behind the scenes.

What is this, a conspiracy theory? She's ridiculous. This universe saw constant war. It was just a coincidence that all these skirmishes were breaking out at the same time now. Nothing mysterious was at play behind the scenes.

No... Wait a second. A real possibility occurred to me. These messes were breaking out in surrounding nations at a very convenient time for me, just when I was entering into a feud with the princes. These conflicts had set me up for success in my international business dealings. Maybe this situation really *was* a little too convenient for me.

It can't be! I covered my mouth to prevent myself from crying out. I had almost exclaimed my gratitude to the whole lecture hall.

This convenient timing... There could be only one person behind it. The Guide!

"What's up, Liam?" Wallace turned his tired face toward me.

I gave him a satisfied grin. "Rejoice, Wallace. My victory is all but assured."

"Are you daydreaming in class or something?"

I wiped the smile off of my face and smacked Wallace upside the head. How dare he mock me when I was being serious?

“Cheers!”

Lighthearted voices and the clinking of glasses rang out in the dimly lit bar. Ladies in expensive dresses fetched drinks for Liam and shared the table with him.

Seated next to Liam was Wallace, who wept while drinking alcohol straight from a bottle. “Dammiiiiit!” he blurted out.

“It’s not every day we come to a high-class place like this, Wallace. How about enjoying yourself, huh?”

“How can I do that? There’s *nothing* to enjoy right now!”

Still terrified of being assassinated, Wallace was trying to distract himself with drink. Being born into royalty, he knew exactly how sophisticated current assassination techniques were.

Of course, things were nothing like they had been two thousand years ago. Back then, there’d been a period during which there were so many royals that a long and bloody conflict to cull their numbers had occurred. That period had given rise to a number of assassin organizations that had all ended up vanishing during the conflict. There was even a story about one such organization being betrayed by their employer—the emperor at the time—and all being turned to stone. The telling of this story concluded with the notion that if those assassins were ever freed from their petrified state, they’d murder every royal they came across in retaliation. Wallace considered this a cautionary tale of sorts, but nonetheless, assassins continued to exist and their methods became more and more sophisticated in current times.

“I’m sure I’m going to disappear without anyone ever knowing what happened to me,” Wallace lamented. “Oh, this has been too short a life.”

Liam cocked his head. “Short? You’ve been alive eighty years already.”

“Yeah, *just* eighty years! I want to live longer!” Wallace wailed.

Bearing in mind lifespans from his previous life, Liam wasn’t sure how to respond to that. “Eighty years is short, eh?” he muttered.

One of the women at their noisy table got up and headed for the restroom.

“Excuse me, would you?”

After entering the bar’s restroom, the woman dropped the flirty smile from her face. She confirmed she was alone and then took a syringe out of her pocketbook.

“What a stupid man. Does he think he’ll survive just by virtue of his sword skills? No one needs *strength* to kill a man.”

She double-checked all her assassination instruments and then turned to head back to Liam...only to find a wall suddenly blocked her from the restroom door.

“Huh?”

The woman looked up.

The dark wall smiled at her. “I agree wholeheartedly. However, if you’re trying to kill *him*, such a small needle won’t be enough.”

The wall was a large man blocking her way. He wore a smiling mask and a black robe. The woman drew in a breath to scream, but a hand reached out from behind and clamped over her mouth. A second enemy had gotten behind her without her noticing. She turned her head to look and found a woman standing there, wearing the same kind of smiling mask.

The masked woman reached out and pulled the skin from the other woman’s face, but instead of a gruesome visage of bare muscle, another face was revealed underneath the one that had been torn away. This woman had only been disguised as one of the bar girls, and with her identity uncovered, she scowled.

The hulking man brought his masked face right up to hers. “A crude disguise like that would have been laughable in our time. Has the knowledge of past organizations been lost?”

The woman dislocated her shoulder in trying to get away, but the masked woman had her pinned and she couldn’t break free.

“Tch!”

The masked woman's skin was seemingly stuck to the other woman, and she couldn't wriggle loose. She then proceeded to sink into the floor.

"Ngh!"

The masked man watched with interest as the woman continued to struggle.

"Well, it would seem strength comes in handy, after all, but perhaps you modern assassins do have your own techniques. Hmm, I think we best get some information out of you. We've got a two-thousand-year gap in our knowledge, after all."

Since it was obvious these two were of the same profession as herself, the woman knew just how bad it was that she'd been caught by them.

I... I have to get away!

She struggled again with a fresh burst of desperation, but the masked woman quickly robbed her of consciousness.

The woman in the mask looked down at her unconscious prey.

"So this is an assassin serving the royal family? She's pathetic."

The man in the mask—Kukuri—smiled in response to her comment.

"I wonder if all assassins are like this now," he said. "Of course, they might simply have developed in different ways than we did. We'll take our time investigating the matter. For now, disguise yourself as the same woman she was pretending to be and go serve Master Liam, would you?" Kukuri ordered the masked woman, his subordinate, to go back out there so there wouldn't be any trouble over the woman having disappeared.

The female assassin had no objections. "Yes, sir."

She promptly took the unconscious woman's head between her hands. Slowly, she began to take on the form of the original woman the assassin had been disguised as. It wasn't simply her face: the female assassin perfectly replicated the woman's clothing and accessories as well. Through the process, the unconscious woman's body spasmed and foam came out of her mouth. With her transformation complete, the female assassin released the woman,

who then sank down into the floor and disappeared from sight.

“It was as I expected,” said the female assassin, who had also accessed the woman’s memories while assuming her disguise. “She had no useful knowledge or skills.”

Kukuri shrugged, disappointed. “I didn’t expect them to send such riffraff after Master Liam. Well, that’s fine. I’ll leave the rest to you then.”

Kukuri himself then sank into the floor and disappeared. After he and the unconscious woman were gone, hurried footsteps came up to the restroom. It was a male staff member.

“Catherine, get back there! We don’t want to make this customer angry!” the man whined through the door, and the female assassin responded appropriately.

She was playing a haughty woman, so my response should be...

“Oh, shut up. I’m coming!”

“Gosh, so testy!” The man then left without having suspected a thing.

Kukuri’s subordinate left the restroom and headed back to Liam.

Three years into my time at the Imperial college, a meeting of a great number of nobles was held at the high-class hotel I called my current home. Naturally, I was the one who had gathered them there.

“I appreciate you all coming to meet with me,” I greeted the nasty-looking bunch.

Several of them stood out in particular for looking particularly nefarious. One of these was young but with combed-back white hair, thin and with a look of mischief to him. He was the gentlemanly Count Francis Sera Gyanne, and my instincts told me I shouldn’t underestimate him.

Count Gyanne said, “I didn’t expect to be called to the Capital Planet and asked to join your faction, Count Banfield, but I appreciate the opportunity.” He was the common villainous type who smiled on the outside without letting you know what he was thinking on the inside.

Another villain was just as easy to spot—the eyepatch-wearing, musclebound Count Jericho Sera Gaul. He sat with his arms crossed and a confident smile on his face.

“Never thought a youngster like you would be summoning me. I would have ignored your invitation if your name wasn’t Count Banfield.”

For all his cheerful delivery, his words bore thorns. Count Gaul’s body was covered in scars, giving him the appearance of a battle-hardened warrior, but apparently he was more brawn than brain. Current medical technology could easily have erased those scars, but he probably kept them because he wanted to look intimidating. He was likely more of a small fry than his appearance and attitude suggested, but the Gaul family *did* have power among the nobles on the outskirts, so I couldn’t underestimate the Gauls, no matter what my impressions told me about this one guy.

Helping me manage this roomful of colorful individuals was Baron Exner, Kurt’s father.

“Let’s get down to business,” he said. “Lord Liam, do you truly intend to establish a faction to support Prince Cleo?”

I was finally officially announcing my intention to form a faction in support of the third prince, and many nobles were apprehensive about it. I managed to use my reputation to gather a lot of them here, but none had actually agreed to join me yet. Most of them clearly thought it was pointless to show their support for Cleo, but I myself had no doubts about my path to victory.

“Of course,” I told Baron Exner. “I’ve promised to make Prince Cleo the next emperor.”

The sound of the nobles’ muttering filled the room. I mostly gathered heads of families, nobles who managed their own domains. The majority of them didn’t typically have cause to come to the Capital Planet and thus had little idea what went on inside the Imperial court.

Even Baron Exner was uneasy. “Doesn’t His Majesty...well, not regard Prince Cleo very favorably?”

“I’m sure he doesn’t, but that’s the point.” Since there was a good chance the

current emperor was my secret enemy, my only choice was to remove him.

Count Gyanne was very interested in what I had to say. By all appearances, my new faction was in a very unfavorable position, but Gyanne nevertheless seemed eager to join.

“Well, it’d certainly be interesting, if it’s possible,” he said. “My family’s been in poor standing with the court ever since earning the ire of the emperor a few generations back. This is a good opportunity for us to make a comeback.”

I wondered what terrible deeds his ancestor had committed. Whatever they were, I was sure Count Gyanne would make for a perfect evil lord comrade.

Seeing that Count Gyanne approved, Count Gaul quickly expressed his interest as well.

“I don’t like the court’s crap affecting me out in my domain, so it’d be great to have an emperor who’s more beneficial for us on the throne. Still, I hear Prince Calvin and Prince Linus are both pretty formidable.”

I projected some holographic documents and magnified them so all the assembled nobles could look them over.

“These documents pertain to secret dealings that Prince Linus is conducting with foreign nations.” This was the information I’d gathered about Linus’s deals with both the Union and the United Kingdom.

Count Gyanne put a hand to his chin, his thoughtful gaze fixed on the data in front of him. “This is nothing unusual—it won’t be enough to harm him. Prince Linus is sure to feign ignorance of any wrongdoing, even with proof.”

“I’m not counting on Prince Linus facing consequences for this.” I wasn’t going to confront him with my findings—I just wanted to make as many people aware of his connections to foreign powers as possible. “Just damaging his reputation will be enough. Prince Cleo will win the throne by having the better reputation.”

Count Gaul looked impressed by my confidence. “If it’s possible, that’s wonderful, but isn’t it rather reckless to go up against Prince Linus?”

Linus had a lot of nobles supporting him—undoubtedly more than I had gathered in this room—and they were all more powerful as well. It’d be

sensible to avoid a conflict with someone like that.

Baron Exner had broken out into a nervous sweat. “The threat is far too great for a mere baron like me to stand against.” He probably thought he didn’t have enough power to contribute.

“Not to worry—Prince Cleo will be taking the brunt of hostility, with me standing behind him. I’d like to have your assistance, but I wouldn’t be demanding anything unreasonable.”

All I wanted for my faction was numbers, as numbers were power. As long as I could say a lot of people supported Cleo, even more would be encouraged to join in.

Count Gaul took a look around the room. “Well, I’d say this was a load of bull if you weren’t the man who took out House Berkeley. Sounds interesting, so count me in.”

Count Gyanne chuckled. “I’m in too.”

With these two influential men having made their decisions, the other nobles all expressed their intention to join the Cleo faction too.

Baron Exner looked over at me. “No one would have backed Prince Cleo without your invitation, Lord Liam.”

It seemed that destroying House Berkeley had given me a fair amount of influence. People would trust even a brash brat like me after what I’d accomplished, for which I was grateful. That wasn’t all we were here for, however.

“I assure all of you,” I said to the assembly, “we’ll be victorious in the end.”

I swept my eyes over the gathered nobles. They were all shady-looking types, each with their own quirks. Villains were always looking out for situations they could benefit from, and the people in this room had been convinced that if they stuck with me, they would indeed benefit. After all, when Cleo became emperor, we’d be able to do pretty much whatever we wanted, and these nobles finally believed it. It’d be *our* time.

I was a true villain, so it was natural that other villains would gather around

me.

“We’ll be the ones to create a new era,” I concluded dramatically.

I smirked, and the members of my new faction all smiled along with me.

After the meeting, Count Gyanne and Count Gaul had a little meeting of their own in another hotel. Count Gyanne had rented the room, and Count Gaul stood at the window, gazing outside at the Capital Planet.

“A new era, eh? I would have laughed someone out of the room if that hadn’t come from Banfield,” Count Gaul said without turning from the window.

Count Gyanne gazed at the drink in his glass, feeling satisfied. “What good luck that a remarkable man like him was born in the outskirts, eh?”

“His grandparents and parents were fools, but this means Lord Alistair’s blood hasn’t died out.”

“Yes—his great-grandfather, the hero of the outskirts... He was a great ruler.”

Liam’s great-grandfather remained well-respected among the nobility on the edges of the Empire.

Gaul chuckled. “Did you see who he called to him? Nothing but misfits.”

“I’d heard that Count Banfield was arrogant, but he’s a benevolent man at heart. I’m sure of it, after seeing who he summoned to the meeting today. It was all people who value dignity and willpower over profit.”

The nobles Liam had gathered were all good-natured lords who ruled proudly, even though they didn’t have much power on their own. Gaul and Gyanne were the same.

“Those closer to the Empire’s center have always discounted those of us on the outskirts. I’d love it if we could put Prince Cleo on the throne and finally do something for our neglected people’s problems. Wouldn’t you, Francis?”

“I feel the same way, Lord Jericho. Count Banfield must be victorious.”

As the representative of Cleo’s faction, Liam had declared his official support

of the third prince to the general public.

That evening, Linus went to see his brother Cleo, and the two of them met in a reception room. After a formal greeting, Linus got down to business.

“Cleo, I had the wrong idea about you.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“Well, I thought you were content to live a peaceful, humble life despite your position. That’s why I discounted you.”

“I see.”

Linus stood up from his seat and looked down at Cleo coldly. “It’s a shame you’ll never sleep soundly again.” This was, in effect, Linus’s declaration of war against Cleo.

“You came all this way just to make threats? You must not have anything better to do, Linus.” Cleo smiled faintly, finding it amusing that Linus would go out of his way to warn him face-to-face about his intentions.

Linus didn’t appreciate Cleo’s taunting. His expression grew harsher, and he dropped all pretenses. “Don’t take me lightly, you little brat. You think we’re on even footing now that you’ve got a little faction of your own? You’re no match for me with whatever riffraff you were able to scrounge up.”

One might wonder, though, if Cleo’s faction really *was* so inconsequential, why would Linus be acting so hostile?

“You seem awfully irritated,” Cleo said. “Is something the matter?”

Linus’s eyes blazed. He took a menacing step forward, but Tia had been standing behind Cleo protectively the entire time.

Her eyes narrowed at him.

“I’m watching you, Prince Linus.”

Linus stopped in his tracks, collected himself, and strode toward the door as if Tia’s glare had put him to flight. Still, before he exited the room he turned to show his usual bravado.

“I think you’ll regret getting involved in this conflict, brother. You’re now my

enemy.”

When Linus had gone, Cleo leaned back in his seat. “We were always enemies, Linus.”

Tia then made Cleo some tea. Watching her made him all the more appreciative of her. Not only was she a strong warrior, but she had a perfect command of etiquette as well. Cleo considered his sister to be an impressive knight, but she wasn’t on Tia’s level.

“Are you not fond of Prince Linus, Your Highness?”

Cleo wasn’t sure how to answer Tia’s question. “It’s not that, exactly. We just both have our positions as princes to consider. Maybe we’d get along under different circumstances.”

Would they have been close if they weren’t royalty? It was a pointless question, and Cleo shook his head.

He lifted the drink Tia had prepared him to his lips, and just then, his sister Cecilia entered the room. Her long, flaxen hair flowed behind her.

“Linus seemed awfully angry, Cleo,” she said blithely. “Did something happen?”

Cecilia seemed to have no idea what was going on. Cleo wasn’t sure what to tell her. *I’d like to get Cecilia out of the palace if possible, for her own safety...*

A fierce conflict was about to break out, and Cleo didn’t feel Cecilia was suited for such a thing.

“It’s nothing, Cecilia. Tia...”

“Yes?”

“Could you ask a favor of Count Banfield for me? I’d like him to find my sister a suitable marriage partner.”

“A marriage partner? Isn’t that something for the court to handle?”

“They won’t. No one here has any real intent to find a worthy match for her.”

Cleo’s awkward position in the hierarchy affected his sister Cecilia as well. She was royalty, same as him, but she was even lower in the line of succession and

didn't even have a fiancé. In other words, she was easily expendable, so no noble in their circle would want to marry her if it meant he might be erased too. In some ways, Cecilia's position was even worse than Wallace's.

Tia understood Cecilia's position and promised to contact Liam. "I'll get in touch with him right away."

Cecilia, for her part, was shocked as soon as the word "marriage" was uttered.

"Huh? What? Why are we talking about me getting married?!"

After dinner with my noble allies had concluded, I had a drink with Baron Exner. Being my friend Kurt's father, I wanted to get to know him a little better, but it seemed I had made a mistake with the drinking part...

"Do you understand, Count?!" he said. "How awkward it feels that my subordinates buy posters of me, and paste them on the insides of their *lockers*?"

Apparently when he was drunk, he let out the stuff he kept bottled up inside. And since I was here with him...

I didn't know how to respond. "Sounds rough..."

No, I couldn't understand what Baron Exner was feeling at all. My own subordinates walking around with pictures of me on their tablets? I guess I could see that, but I couldn't imagine a ruling lord being viewed by his populace as an idol. Apparently, he really controlled the hearts of his people, even despite his evil nature. That didn't sound like a bad thing to me, but it seemed to trouble Baron Exner.

"If the people who normally conduct themselves professionally to my face get excited over pictures of me in private, how am I supposed to trust anyone anymore?"

He was crying drunkenly now, which made me a little sympathetic for him, but in my eyes, he was utilizing his popularity well.

"I feel *pathetic* allowing merchandise like that to be sold, just to make money for my domain. Not to mention that I haven't been able to find someone for my

son to marry... Oh—you're still considering accepting my daughter to train at House Banfield, right?"

I was impressed that he'd go so far as to sell merchandise of himself to make money. *Maybe I should try that too? No, forget it.* I couldn't imagine that merchandise of me would sell at all. There had in fact been plans to create some at one point, but I quashed them myself.

Oops, Baron Exner asked me a question.

"I haven't forgotten," I replied. "She's welcome any time. Do you really have no one to marry Kurt, though?"

"Well, we're just self-made nobles, after all. I've put such a burden on him..."

Baron Exner felt awful for the position he'd put Kurt in. Having been granted their noble title instead of being born into it, the Exners didn't get a lot of respect in high society. Kurt was probably feeling very pressured by that, and he didn't feel like he could open up about it to me. *Is that guy okay?*

While I continued drinking with Baron Exner, a call came in from Tia, who I had left with Prince Cleo.

"At a time like this...?" I sighed. I apologized to Baron Exner, "Excuse me—a subordinate's trying to contact me."

I stood up and took the call from Tia on my tablet.

"What is it?"

I thought I heard a sexy whisper say, *"Ah, Lord Liam's voice!"* but it was probably just my imagination. In her regular voice, Tia explained her reason for calling.

"Prince Cleo was hoping to get your assistance with something, Lord Liam."

"Money?" I asked her how much, but on the tablet screen, Tia shook her head.

"No, it's not about additional funds; it's about his sister, Princess Cecilia. She's over 150 years old, so she should be married by this point, but due to her unfavorable status, she can't find a suitor."

Cleo wanted me to find a fiancé for Cecilia... I wasn't sure what to say to that. I'd gotten a glimpse at her when I met with Cleo, and she'd come across as a beautiful if somewhat airheaded woman.

"He thinks I can find someone for her? Shouldn't the court be deciding that?" If she could just marry whoever she wanted, you'd think there wouldn't be a problem. However, her awkward position was apparently going to make it hard for her, no matter what.

"There's no problem on that end. The court is leaving her alone since she's unattached at the moment. I believe this would be a good opportunity to make a connection between her and a noble family you have close ties with, Lord Liam."

Tia suggested using Princess Cecilia as an opportunity to make another family indebted to me. After all, the princess was still royalty from the most respected bloodline in the Empire. Anyone who had a problem with her was being shortsighted. Her father was the emperor, and her mother came from a powerful noble family. It was only her closeness to Cleo that was an issue. Unlike Wallace, as soon as Cleo's problems were behind him, Cecilia should be able to find someone to marry in no time.

"Hm... A partner for her, eh?"

"Yes. Her lineage is flawless, and she has a rather pleasant disposition. It would be nice if you could find her a suitable match..."

As I gave this some thought my eyes settled on Baron Exner, drunk and dozing at the table where I'd left him. He was currently in search of a bride for his son, wasn't he...

"A self-made house would benefit from marrying into the Imperial family, wouldn't they?"

"Have you thought of someone?"

Staying on the line with Tia, I stepped over to Baron Exner and woke him.

"Baron Exner, I have an idea for you about Kurt's marriage."

"Kurt? Yeah... I really need to find someone for him soon..."

He was still drunk, but at least he was listening.

“I know someone from a very prestigious household. She is quite a bit older than him, though...”

Cecilia’s age was the only issue I could think of. Kurt was eighty, like I was. Cecilia, on the other hand, was over one hundred and fifty years old. She may have *looked* like a good match for him, but I was worried the age difference might be too much.

“Older? Oh, I’d feel sorry for Kurt...”

Baron Exner seemed to have the same doubts. *Guess it won’t work out, after all.*

“Yeah, I guess a seventy-year difference is a lot, huh?”

Baron Exner looked surprised to hear the actual number. “Seventy? That sounds like a pretty reasonable difference.”

Huh? It is?!

“I-is that really okay?” I asked. I thought maybe in his drunken state he was misunderstanding me, but Baron Exner was apparently of sound mind.

“An older girl might be nice, I think. If Kurt could rely on a mature wife to support him, that would put me at ease too.”

It appeared that a seventy-year age difference was perfectly acceptable in this fantasy world.

“Will Kurt be okay with that, though?” I asked out of concern for my friend. “You’re sure the age difference wouldn’t bother him?”

Baron Exner considered the question. “Well, a hundred-year difference we’d have to think about, but I remember Kurt telling me he’d be okay with less than that...”

Was he? If that was the case, I decided I should introduce the two of them right away.

“Let’s set up a meeting for them, then.”

From here on, it was basically just a matter of introducing them to each other

before the wedding. I felt a bit bad for Kurt, having this decision made for him, but we were nobles, after all. If he didn't like his bride-to-be, he could always just find himself a mistress on the side.

His spirits now lifted, Baron Exner was becoming eager. "Absolutely! Oh, Kurt will finally be able to stand on his own! Ah... But should we wait until he's out of the military academy first?"

Baron Exner might have been a little unsteady at the moment, but he was sharp enough to look to the future.

"He can wait until after school to get married, but let's get them engaged now."

"Aha! There shouldn't be a problem with that!"

I related what had been decided to Tia, whose call was still open. "It's settled. We'll match Princess Cecilia with Kurt."

"Very well. Shall I have Lord Kurt summoned from the academy now?"

"Of course."

Nice! I've taken care of my friend's little marriage problem.

Cecilia was from an important family and was beautiful as well. I was sure Kurt would be pleased with the match. I looked over at Baron Exner—he had gone right back to sleep, but this time with a lighter heart.

"Look forward to the ceremony."

Upon Baron Exner's return to his domain, there was a great commotion.

"What do you mean *royalty* is marrying into our family?" his wife shouted, her eyes bulging.

It was unbelievable that an Imperial princess was marrying into a self-made baron's family, and the whole of House Exner was in an uproar about it.

Baron Exner flinched as his wife leaned over him. "I-I don't know! I don't know! I had a bit too much to drink and fell asleep, and by the time I woke up, it was all arranged!"

The baron had awakened to find that his son Kurt was set to be married to Cecilia, an Imperial princess, and plans were already in place for the two of them to meet. Things were set in stone. If they tried to back out now, House Exner was done for as nobility.

“We’re a *brand-new* barony!” his wife wailed. “We don’t have the status to accept an Imperial princess into the family!”

Baron Exner made his excuses. “I told the count it wouldn’t work out, but he kept saying it was fine!” He made it sound like Liam had all but forced him to accept.

“This is not okay! We are *poor*!” his wife shouted.

A short distance away, a beautiful girl stood there, watching her parents’ frantic conversation. She was Kurt’s sister, Ciel Sera Exner. She had the same purple eyes as Kurt and voluminous silver hair. Her distinct facial features resembled Kurt’s as well, and her body was petite and slim.

As Ciel listened to her parents, she spoke with Kurt through a long-distance communication system. “Did you hear all that, Kurt?”

Kurt gave her an awkward smile, his face projected as a hologram in front of her. He had a good idea what the situation was from listening to his parents. “*I heard. Never thought I’d be getting married to an Imperial princess...*”

“Count Banfield is awful to make this decision without asking you. I feel terrible for you.”

“*Ah ha ha... You’re making too big a deal out of it.*”

“I think you have reason to be angry, Kurt.”

“*Well, Liam’s the one who set this up, so I can’t turn him down,*” Kurt said, his good humor slipping somewhat.

Ciel’s dissatisfaction with Liam was only growing. *It’s horrible of him, putting my brother in a situation like this.*



Ciel idolized her older brother. If asked what her ideal man was be like, she would say Kurt without a second's hesitation. Now that Kurt had been put in a tough spot, she was incensed—and at Liam, since he was the source of Kurt's troubles.

Something else that she was curious about came to mind. "Lately you seem tired all the time, Kurt. Is something bothering you?"

Ciel worried that Kurt had become unwell, but he quickly changed the subject.

"Training's really tough at the academy. That reminds me; you'll be starting your training soon, won't you, Ciel? Is everything all set with that?"

"Yes! I'll be heading to the Capital Planet soon to introduce myself."

Ciel would be staying at House Banfield for a time, but first she would visit the Capital Planet to pay her respects to Liam and Rosetta.

"Liam's strict, so be sure you work hard."

Ciel grew more uneasy about her brother the longer she looked at his projected image. She could see how frail he was becoming. "Kurt, are you *certain* you're all right?"

"I'm fine. You're such a worrywart, Ciel."

Finishing his call to his sister, Kurt returned to his dorm room and sat down on his bed. His roommate was out, so he found himself alone.

"So I'm getting married, huh..."

With a brooding look on his face, he took out a small box he'd brought with him to the military academy. Inside were several small bottles, each with some sort of solution inside them. The pink drug he'd bought in the Capital Planet's underground was one of them.

Kurt's hands trembled as he reached into the box.

"Once. Just once..."

Kurt looked agonized as he picked up one of the small bottles.

Chapter 5:

Liam Fools Around

IN HIS OFFICE, the prime minister finished reading the information Serena had sent him and leaned back in his chair, gazing up at the ceiling.

He sighed deeply. “Prince Linus is taking these dealings with foreign powers too lightly. Maybe he’s just not thinking things through completely, but it’s making him stand out, and in a bad way.”

The prime minister felt a headache coming on now that he’d reviewed Linus’s secret interactions with foreign nations. The deal he’d made with some of the worlds of the United Kingdom would only cost the Empire an undeveloped border territory that wouldn’t particularly be missed, but the prime minister still wasn’t happy about the way Linus was going about making these arrangements.

“Whatever problems might arise from this will fall on the Empire, not on him.”

If Linus won the succession conflict, then those shady powers he’d made pacts with became the Empire’s problem. And if he lost, then those foreign powers would be bitter and lay the blame on the Empire, not on Linus. In either case, it wouldn’t be the new emperor who had to deal with the mess, but the prime minister and other governing officials.

“Linus is really throwing his weight around for not even being the emperor yet.”

Despite the prime minister’s misgivings, Linus’s dealings didn’t really affect him at this time. Such moves had not been uncommon in the Empire’s long history, and there was no cause for panic.

In truth, it was Count Banfield who was causing him real trouble. Liam was aggressively forging connections with other nations and providing them with vast amounts of supplies. The thing was, he was allying himself with people who were in opposition to the ones Linus was supporting, and Linus was surely

aware of this.

“Prince Linus won’t take this lying down...”

Linus had meant to punish Liam for refusing to join his faction, but Liam had fought back by declaring his support for the third prince, the candidate furthest from the throne. He even formed an entire faction to further that aim.

Almost 200 nobles made up Liam’s faction. He’d started with about 100, but their numbers had steadily grown. Many of these nobles were barely making ends meet in territories along the outskirts of the Empire, but some influential lords were among them too. Nearly all of them were families the Empire had always been content to ignore—nobles who had never been part of court politics and those who had never taken part in past succession conflicts.

With all those people brought together for one cause, Cleo’s presence had truly grown in the Empire. Even so, the majority of his support came from Liam. Everyone in the palace knew the *real* conflict here was between Linus and Liam.

Feeling concerned, the prime minister checked the data on House Banfield’s financial situation, then relaxed somewhat. “I thought those economic sanctions would ruin him, but I guess I needn’t have worried. He was making a killing on rare metals before, but he was also managing his territory in other ways that kept him standing firm. This young man is so shrewd, it’s frightening.”

Though he said “frightening,” the prime minister had a very good opinion of Liam. He admired that Liam had kept his options open instead of relying solely on the rare metals that helped him make the majority of his money.

However, the fact that Liam was still thriving would only intensify the conflict between Liam and Linus. When Linus saw that he wasn’t suffering at all under the sanctions he’d called for, he would surely become even more enraged, and things would escalate.

“I wonder what Prince Linus’s next move will be...”

The prime minister knew it was imprudent of him, but he couldn’t help but look forward to seeing how this conflict would resolve.

Linus swept everything off the surface of the desk in his office. His work desk was always covered in expensive instruments that prioritized style and monetary value over function, but he knocked all of them to the floor in a rage.

“That little braaat!!!”

Unsavory rumors had been circulating about Linus lately—rumors that he’d made secret deals with some of the Empire’s neighboring nations, and that he was selling off a territory on the Empire’s border, piece by piece, to foreign powers in order to obtain their cooperation.

The worst part about these rumors was that they were true.

To Linus, the gossip made it clear that Liam was flaunting his information-gathering capabilities.

“You think you’ve outsmarted me, Banfield?!”

Linus was infuriated because it was Cleo’s faction itself that had spread these rumors—though Liam hadn’t confronted him with the matter directly. To make matters even worse, it was *Calvin’s* faction that was really exploiting these rumors to ruin Linus. The nobles of that faction harassed him by condemning him for his actions almost daily in the Imperial court.

“You’ve gone too far now, and you’re going to regret that.”

Liam was a much more detestable foe to Linus than his rival Cleo, but it would be difficult to crush Liam. After all, Linus was also in the middle of a feud with Calvin, who was an even more formidable enemy. He couldn’t concentrate all his efforts on fighting Liam lest he make himself vulnerable to attacks from Calvin.

“Show yourselves,” Linus said to the empty room.

He snapped his fingers, and a group of men immediately rose up from the floor as if they’d been waiting beneath it. Wearing distinctive masks, the men knelt before Linus. These men worked in the underbelly of the Empire, belonging to one of several such organizations. This particular one was under Linus’s control.

The leader, wearing a red mask, spoke for the rest of the group. His voice

sounded synthesized, perhaps as a function of the mask to disguise his real voice.

“Things not going well, Your Highness?”

Linus fell into his chair and said, “It’s time. I want you to make an example of Cleo. And...take out Liam too, along with as many of his allies as you can.” Linus’s voice was icy cold as he ordered them to assassinate Liam.

The masked men belonged to an underground organization that handled such shady operations. Linus had contracted them to accomplish whatever dirty work he needed done.

“The fee will be considerably high to assassinate those two,” said the man in the red mask. “They have skilled people protecting them.”

The assassin projected the required sum for Linus to view. When Linus saw the number, a vein bulged out of his forehead. One of his eyes twitched.

Even so, he quickly accepted the proposed fee. “The money doesn’t matter—just hurry up and erase those two. Eliminate the idiots who thought they could defy me.”

The man in the red mask chuckled in his synthesized voice. “They’ve already killed one of our own, so this is a good opportunity for revenge. She may have been little more than a grunt, but retribution is required, nonetheless. Still, do you really think it’s wise to devote such resources to Prince Cleo when you’re fighting against Prince Calvin as well?”

This secret organization also handled Linus’s protection and information-gathering for him. If he diverted these resources to Liam and Cleo, he would lose manpower elsewhere. Linus was aware of this, and he knew that logically he should ignore Cleo and devote his efforts to the conflict with Calvin...but he just couldn’t let the matter of Liam go.

“I said to erase them.”

At his order, the man in the red mask sank into the floor, still kneeling. The other masked men sank away in a similar manner.

Left alone again, Linus imagined the sight of Liam lying dead. It brought a

smirk to his face. “You seem to have some confidence in your sword skills, Liam, but these people work in the Empire’s underbelly. I don’t think you’ll escape from them unscathed.”

This organization had done dirty work for the Empire for a long time, having killed their fair share of accomplished knights. With their mysterious abilities, they were difficult foes to handle for people who were merely strong in a conventional sense.

“I’m sure Liam’s got assassins of his own, but they won’t be on this group’s level. You made the wrong person angry, you little twerp.”

“Impossible... How could this have happened?” I was past the halfway point in my college career, and the end was finally in sight. “Have I really not accomplished a single thing in the last few years?”

I was in my room at the hotel where I stayed on the Capital Planet, on the floor on hands and knees with my head hanging low. I had just been struck by a harsh truth.

Amagi stood beside me, looking down with some exasperation. “You have accomplished *many* things over the last few years, Master. You established a faction in support of the third prince, which has thrown the palace into quite the frenzy. Additionally, your grades in school have been outstanding. I believe that is all very impressive.”

“But this isn’t the student life I imagined!” I protested, raising my head.

Amagi still looked exasperated. Anyone else would only see her usual expressionless face, but I could tell.

“Are you referring to fooling around with women? I assumed you had given up on that.”

On that day when I reunited with Kurt and went drinking with him, I declared my intention of fooling around with girls. I thought then that nothing was impossible with my status and fortune! Yet...what happened? I directed all my energy into starting a faction of nobles in support of one of the Imperial princes and kept busy with schoolwork.

I hoped Wallace would come in handy in that regard, but his drinking had been out of control ever since he felt pulled into the succession conflict. It wasn't like it was affecting his health or anything, but every night he went off to drink alone. He didn't set up a single mixer for me. What a genuinely useless guy.

"I promised that I would in front of everyone! How do you think they'll all look at me if nothing happens? I won't be able to take it!!!" My face flushed red just imagining the embarrassment I would feel facing my friends again. "And now I'm out of time..."

"I suppose that is accurate," Amagi stated. "Lord Kurt will be coming to the Capital Planet for his prenuptial meeting with Princess Cecilia soon, so you will be seeing all of your friends again at that time."

It had been arranged for Kurt to leave the military academy temporarily for his meeting with Cecilia. Normally they wouldn't have allowed him to leave, but when royalty was involved, even the academy had to make exceptions.

And since Kurt was coming to the Capital Planet soon, Eila had already said, "Let's all go drinking together again!"

"Eila's already picked the day we're going out, for crying out loud! I've only got a few days left and I haven't fooled around with anyone! They're all gonna laugh at me!!!"

What kind of evil lord was I if I couldn't even mess around with girls? Kurt and Eila were going to think I was absolutely pathetic.

"Lord Kurt seems to be the faithful type, so I doubt he would laugh at you. I also believe there is little chance that Lady Eila would ridicule you either. At the worst, you may be the subject of some light teasing, Master."

"That's the same thing!"

When we got together to drink, I'd be teased relentlessly. I could picture it now...

"You talk like a villain, but I knew you wouldn't actually get anywhere with the ladies," Kurt would say with a grin. *"I just don't think you're capable of it."*

And Eila... *"You're so pure, Liam! Rosetta's the only one for you, isn't she? And yet you try to act all bad. How cute!"*

As for Wallace? *"You're not suited to be an evil lord, Liam, but if you really want, I can give you some personal lessons on how to be just like me!"*

I could picture how all my friends would laugh at me. It pissed me off, so I gave Wallace a solid punch in that imaginary scene.

"You don't care if they mock me, Amagi?"

I clung to her skirt, and Amagi put her hands under my arms and lifted me up just as she had when I was a child. She didn't embrace me, however, and stood me up on my own feet instead.

"If you would like to have dalliances with women, what about the ones that have come here from your domain? There are plenty for you to choose from: the girls Lady Rosetta brought with her, knights, officials, and many others. I can call any number of them here immediately if you just ask, Master."

The high-class hotel where I stayed housed a good number of people who had accompanied me here from House Banfield's domain. Naturally, plenty of them were women, and they would have no choice but to obey if I summoned them to me. Owing to my position, I could do whatever I wanted with them...but I didn't want to change my plans now just because I was short on time.

"My harem has to be carefully selected. I don't want to compromise."

Amagi narrowed her eyes, but this time I couldn't tell if it was out of irritation or fondness. "It is just like you to stand firm in your decisions, Master."

"I just don't want to compromise!" I repeated sulkily, turning my back to Amagi.

She changed the subject. "On a different topic, Master..."

"Hm?" I turned back to her and watched as Amagi projected information about a certain person in front of me.

Amagi explained, "Lady Ciel from House Exner has arrived on the Capital Planet. As you may remember, we accepted a request to oversee her noble training. She should arrive at the hotel sometime today."

“Kurt’s sister? Isn’t it still a bit early for that?”

Ciel was the first person from a baron’s family that House Banfield would be taking in for training, though she would only be staying with us for a few years. She wouldn’t get the full experience of noble training like I did. Still, welcoming a child from a family of their rank was proof of House Banfield’s status in noble society, so Ciel would be an important guest for us.

Amagi explained what Ciel was doing here now. “You and Lady Rosetta will not be able to leave the Capital Planet for some time, so Lady Ciel is here for something of an introduction before staying in our own domain.”

“Having a face-to-face, eh?”

“It seems she also strongly requested to visit the Capital Planet itself.”

“Oh, she wanted to come see the big city?”

Youngsters yearning for excitement in the city was the same in this life as it had been in my last. Ciel must’ve been counting on having some fun on the Capital Planet, so I instructed Amagi to entertain our important guest.

“Set her up with someone to show her around town, then. Give her some pocket money too.” I thought that’d be enough to provide her a good time, but Amagi pointed out that wasn’t the reason Ciel wanted to come here.

“I believe her objective in coming to the Capital Planet is to visit her brother, Lord Kurt. The two of them have a very close relationship, so she is looking forward to seeing him.”

“Ah, so she used me as an excuse to come see Kurt?” That honestly annoyed me a little, but then I remembered how gloomy Kurt had looked the last time I saw him. *Seeing his sister for the first time in a while would probably do him some good.* “I guess that’s fine. Just make sure everyone treats her well.”

“Understood.” Amagi bowed her head.

Well, that was the Ciel problem taken care of...but my own problem was still unresolved.

“I am Ciel Sera Exner.”

In a reception room of the grand hotel where Liam resided, Ciel nervously curtsied before a smiling blonde woman. The blonde was Rosetta, and several people also affiliated with House Banfield stood around them, watching over their meeting.

Rosetta motioned to a nearby couch. "It's very nice to meet you, Ciel. Please, have a seat."

"A-all right."

It was a lavish room filled with opulent furnishings, and Ciel was very nervous to be there. She couldn't help wondering just how much the couch that she was sitting on cost.

"Your real training won't start for a while yet, so don't worry about that right now," Rosetta said kindly to the nervous Ciel. "You're our guest."

"That's true, but I *am* here to learn from you..." It wouldn't look good for House Exner if Ciel came here as the count's guest only to indulge herself as House Banfield was higher ranked than House Exner. Ciel knew she couldn't afford to disgrace herself here.

Rosetta smiled warmly, seeing how nervous Ciel still was. "You'll tire yourself out if you remain so tense. Ah, I know! While you're here on the Capital Planet, why not sightsee a bit?"

Ciel wasn't sure how best to respond. "I... I'm fine. I'm just here to introduce myself."

Rosetta gently kept at her. "Part of a balanced education is having new experiences. You should see for yourself what kind of place the Capital Planet is."

"All right." Ciel nodded, seeing the wisdom in Rosetta's words.

Rosetta frowned. "Darling was supposed to be joining us, but he went out suddenly. I'm sorry he's not here to meet you."

"Oh?"

"I think he'll be back by tonight, though. And..." Rosetta gave Ciel some good news. "Kurt arrived today as well. He's out right now, but I'll give you his room

number. You can stop by and see him later.”

“Really?!” Ciel’s face lit up when she learned she’d be reunited with her beloved brother soon.

Rosetta smiled again, touched by the girl’s happiness.

When you came to the city from the countryside, the sheer number of people there was surprising. It would feel like a festival was being held, but then someone would tell you that it was like that in the city every single day, and you’d be even more surprised. At least that’s how I remembered it.

But things were different in this world I’d been reincarnated into. Somewhere or other on the Capital Planet, festivals really *did* occur every day. The type and size of each event varied, but most of them were purely for enjoyment rather than to commemorate some historical event. Therefore, I figured I’d participate in one of these festivals and see if I could pick up a chick or two before time ran out. However...

“This sucks,” I groused. “Today just happens to only have an event for the unveiling of new mobile knights?”

I’d rushed from the hotel in search of girls, but the only event I’d found was one completely unsuited to meeting them. This event had been organized for military businesses so they could unveil new weapons technology. No, I wasn’t gonna meet chicks there.

“Guess I should just go home...”

I had just heaved a sigh of defeat when a young woman appeared in my field of view. To put it simply, she looked like she didn’t belong here, but not in a bad way. She just stood out from the crowd.

Every place on the Capital Planet was always crowded with people, so much so that it could get suffocating. The buildings were tightly packed together, and the typical fashions were so colorful that it looked like the multitudes constantly wore festive costumes. These features added to the feeling of unending celebration on the Capital Planet.

I continued watching the girl who'd caught my eye. She walked along with her long, straight blue hair fluttering behind her. Her skin was pale, and she wore a white dress. Her whole look was very simple. Because everyone around her was decked out in such loud clothing, this young woman who might otherwise have appeared nondescript ended up standing out instead. Other people were noticing her too, turning to look at her in a lovestruck way as she passed them.

I was immediately interested in this rare specimen. As I approached the girl, she stopped to look into a store window. The figure I saw reflected in the glass was slender, her chest average-sized; just large enough to be noticeable. I also caught sight of her face, which was beautiful but oddly listless. The girl sighed and seemed to be hesitating over whether she should turn back and return the way she came or not.

The products displayed in the store window were simply a slideshow of holograms, but they looked like the real thing. The young woman didn't look compelled to buy any of them though, and when I saw her turn to walk away I realized I was drawn to her.

"Hm... I like her."

The girl looked somber and somehow fragile. Amagi was the only decent woman in my circle—all the rest were so messed up that I couldn't find myself attracted to them at all, no matter how pretty they were. Yet something about this young woman plucked at my heartstrings.

I decided to muster up the courage to talk to her, but just then, a trio of sketchy-looking men surrounded her. They cut off her escape as they called out to her.

"Hey, you new on the Capital Planet? We can show you around."

"You're by yourself, right? It'll be more fun to hang out with us."

At the arrival of these men who seemed used to chatting up any attractive woman they came across, I sped up my pace. I called out to them in turn.

"She's with me."

The young woman turned around and blinked her eyes in surprise, so I asked her, "They're bothering you, right?" She looked flustered, but she gave me a

slight nod.

I then turned back to the men and stepped in front of her. “You heard me—back off,” I commanded.

The men exchanged looks, smirking, and one of them reached out for my collar.

“Ooh, a possessive boyfriend! Maybe you’re the one who should back—*huh?*”

I grabbed the man’s arm, and as I squeezed, you could hear the sound of bones creaking. The man’s grimacing face broke out in a sweat.

“S-stop it!”

“‘Stop it’? You mean ‘*please* stop,’ don’t you? I can squeeze harder if you’d like.”

The other men went pale and scattered. The one I was holding onto whimpered pathetically, so I finally let him go. He promptly fled too.

With the pickup artists gone, I turned back to the blue-haired girl. “Since I came to your rescue, why not hang out with me?”

The girl looked rather stunned at my haughty, noble tone. “Huh? Err...”

For a second, I worried that I scared her, but she seemed more hesitant than anything. In that moment, something made me wonder if she was someone I’d met before. I knew I didn’t recognize her though.

“Do I know you?” I asked. “I’m sorry, but if we’ve met before I don’t remember.”

But how would I not remember meeting a girl like this? While I was thinking this, the girl blushed and shook her head, her blue hair swaying behind her.

“Th-this is the first time we’ve met...”

Well, that settled that.

“I see. Well, do you know who I am?”

I was well-known enough, so it wasn’t unreasonable that she might know my name.

“I do...” The girl looked down and blushed again. She nervously gripped the fabric of her dress.

I thought her reaction might be a favorable sign, but maybe it was just wishful thinking. While I considered how to respond, I remembered that mobile knight event again.

“I planned on killing some time by going somewhere, but it wouldn’t be any fun on my own. Want to come with me?”

I thought that was a decent enough invitation, but I wasn’t really sure if this was how hitting on people was supposed to go. It had been eighty years since I’d been reincarnated, but this was my first attempt at picking up a chick in all those years...not that I had a lot of experience in my past life either.

“Huh?” The girl looked up at me as if she hadn’t been expecting an invitation at all.

“I’m asking if you want to kill some time with me. They’re unveiling some new models of mobile knights at an event close by. There’ll probably be food stands and stuff in the venue. S-so... What do you think?”

At least we could enjoy a bit of the festive mood. I would have preferred bringing her to a better place, but unfortunately the only restaurants I was familiar with were connected to my school, the only shops I visited were inside my hotel. I couldn’t bring her to my school, and bringing her back to my hotel would be even worse. Everyone staying there was related to House Banfield, so if I was seen with a woman, it would undoubtedly get back to Rosetta. I didn’t think she’d confront me about it, but I still didn’t want to cause any unnecessary controversies. The mobile knight event seemed like the safest option.

I was afraid I failed in my attempt to pick her up—the young woman was still giving me that baffled look.

“If you don’t want to, that’s fine,” I mumbled. “I’m sorry for bothering you.”

Of course, I could have used my status as a noble to force her to accompany me, and that was probably the right thing to do as an evil lord, but... The girl just looked so pure and innocent. If this were Tia or Marie, or even Nias or Eulisia, I

wouldn't have hesitated to be rough and treat her harshly, but something was different about this girl.

I turned to walk away, but the girl quickly grabbed my arm. I had taken her for being fragile and timid, but it seemed like I was wrong.

"Hey..." I turned back to her, surprised and a bit wary.

She looked awfully embarrassed but stared right at me with her gray eyes. Her face was flushed even redder than before.

"I-I'll go with you," she stammered, clutching her other hand to her chest.



Around that same time, Ciel was wandering the vicinity of the hotel with some female knights accompanying her as guides. After they showed her around some, she went into a café and sat by the front window, gazing at the town. The knights stood watch outside.

“The Capital Planet really is amazing... Oh?”

At that moment, Liam just happened to be walking past the café, accompanied by a woman. Ciel had caught a glimpse of him on an earlier occasion when he’d visited her home, and before coming to the Capital Planet, she’d re-familiarized herself with what he looked like to be sure she wouldn’t mistake him for someone else. There was no question that it was him, and Ciel was a little irritated to see him walking around with a meek-looking, blue-haired woman.

“He has Lady Rosetta, but he’s hanging around with another woman? I don’t understand men at all. My brother would *never* do something like that.”

She was disgusted that Liam would spend time with a woman other than his fiancée, but then again, it wasn’t strange for people of Liam’s status to have multiple lovers. Many a noble had both a marriage partner and a romantic partner, so if there was a problem here, it was that Rosetta considered Liam her romantic partner. Even so, to Ciel, Liam’s behavior was a terrible betrayal, and she felt sorry for Rosetta.

She looked closer at the woman Liam was walking with. “She’s pretty cute,” she had to admit to herself.

Ciel had thought to find fault with the beautiful young woman, but she couldn’t think of anything bad to say about her. Instead, she saved all her negative feelings for Liam.

An open square which was usually reserved for more festive events was currently filled with about a dozen brand-new metal behemoths.

“Feels like we’ve wandered into a land of giants,” I said.

“There’s a cute one over there,” said the girl.

“It’s really important for mobile knights to look good, don’t you think?”

Common citizens who had visited the event out of sheer curiosity looked up at the mobile knights and chatted about them in awe.

I was used to seeing mobile knights myself, so nothing about this event was new to me or particularly interesting to me. I figured the woman beside me wasn’t likely to be interested either, but I figured I should offer some commentary to her.

“The Weapons Factories are just putting their latest model mobile knights on display,” I explained. “I doubt you find this very interesting, so let’s just have a quick look and then find someplace to eat.”

There were several Weapons Factories that created arms for the Imperial Army, all competing to produce the best weapons and outsell each other. Thus, Nias of the Seventh Weapons Factory and Eulisia, who once belonged to the Third Weapons Factory, remained rivals, even though they both worked for the Empire. All the various idiosyncrasies of the competing Weapons Factories were reflected in these mobile knights.

The woman stopped in front of one of the towering human-shaped figures. “That’s the Third Weapons Factory’s Nemain.”

“You recognize it?” I asked, surprised.

The woman looked a little embarrassed. “Err, I heard House Banfield used them.”

“It’s a top contender for the next generation’s best craft. They’re pricey, but they perform well.”

A group of people had gathered around the Nemain, a craft that looked like a winged knight. It was a stylish, good-looking machine with excellent performance as well. The Third Weapons Factory was popular, always producing craft that looked good while still emphasizing performance and stability.

The woman glanced in another direction, toward the Seventh Weapons

Factory's display area. Unlike the Nemain, the craft that had drawn her attention was very round, and its cute appearance had caused it to be surrounded by children.

"That's the Raccoon, right?"

"What are you, a mobile knight fanatic?" I asked. "That model was just developed. Nobody should know about it yet."

"If you look into these things, there's plenty of information to be found."

The girl was enjoying the event a lot more than I expected. She looked very interested indeed in all the mobile knights we walked past. I steered us toward the Raccoon display, telling her I planned to taunt the representatives of the Seventh Weapons Factory there. When I saw the amusement on the girl's face, I realized I hadn't yet asked for her name.

"We haven't introduced ourselves, have we? I'm Liam. What's your name?"

The girl stopped so abruptly that I took a few steps without her and had to turn and look back at her. She seemed unsure of how to answer.

"It's...Lillie."

From the way she responded, I guessed she had some reason for hiding her real name. She told me she was called "Lillie," but I was certain that was an alias. *Lillie, eh? Like the flower, the lily?* It was appropriate, considering her beauty.

"That name really suits you."

"Y-you think so?"

She still seemed awkward and bashful, but she smiled as though she genuinely appreciated the compliment. Was she a sheltered noble girl? Some nobles cherished their children so much they barely let them leave their homes during their upbringing. Some of them were raised very strictly too, so maybe she'd snuck out of her house and that was why she stood out from the crowd. In any case, I decided it'd be rude of me to ask for her real name.

"You're a lot more casual with me than I would've expected," I told her. "If that's how you normally speak, you can keep it up—I don't mind."

Lillie covered her mouth in surprise when I pointed out the informal way she'd been speaking to me. "Oh! I-it's not..."

"Really, it's fine. Anyway, I'm gonna go tease these guys, since it seems like the Raccoon is more of a hit with kids than adults. I've got a long history with the Seventh Weapons Factory."

"That's not very nice of you," Lillie said, but she continued beside me nevertheless.

Every so often our arms would brush accidentally, and even that seemed to embarrass her. *How cute*. The only women around me normally were like dogs fighting over scraps of affection, so this was very refreshing to me. It was even starting to make me feel bashful myself.

"W-we're almost there... Hmm?"

When we arrived at the Raccoon display area, I spotted someone I knew running a food stand. Oddly, this woman was in tears as she stood there, making something resembling takoyaki. Children crowded around the stand, making fun of her—or maybe they were comforting her? Ah, yes—it looked like they were trying to cheer her up.

One of them said, "I shouldn't have said you suck at this yesterday, Miss, but I don't think you should have brought in a machine to do the work instead of learning how to cook."

Another kid said, "Doesn't look right using a big machine like that for a festival food stand."

"Why are you crying, Miss?"

As the children pointed out, behind the food stand stood a large machine that looked totally out of place there. And next to it stood Nias.

"I'm doing my best, okay?" she whimpered. "But for me, it's easier to create a manufacturing machine than to cook food! The stuff it makes tastes good too, so stop complaining!"

From overhearing this conversation, I determined that Nias had been put in charge of a food stand, but not being a good cook, her solution had been to

create a machine that made the food for her. Most exasperating of all was that the food her invention produced wasn't festival-quality at all—it was too high quality. What did she think a food stand was all about, if not to sell tasty, cheap treats?

"You really are a disaster," I said, staring at her coldly.

Nias flew out from behind the stand and ran at me, still wearing her apron. She took out a tablet. "Lord Liam! What a coincidence, seeing you here!"

"What are *you* doing here? You should be developing and manufacturing, not selling snacks."

Nias was saddled with a rather unfortunate personality, but her technical skills were the real deal. It was a waste of her talents to have her running a stand like this.

Nias removed her glasses and wiped her eyes. "We haven't sold any new Raccoons, so my boss told me to run the food stand instead. It's all because *you* won't buy any, Lord Liam!"

"I *did* buy them! Three hundred of them!"

"We developed them as our next-generation craft, but we've only sold those three hundred units. We're still in the red! Please buy more—I'll do anythiiiiing!!!"

The children watched as Nias clung to me and sobbed without sparing a thought for how it looked.

One of the kids commented, "Guess she got dumped 'cause she's so pathetic."

"He must like that young, pretty one more than the pathetic one."

These children were merciless, and I heard whispers from people passing by as well.

"Love troubles?"

"And in a place like this?"

"Poor thing... Guess he broke up with her."

Everyone misunderstood the situation because Lillie stood next to me while Nias clung to me, crying. They thought I was some jerk who dumped Nias and was dating Lillie now instead. I mean, I *was* a jerk, but I didn't like people blaming me for evil deeds I hadn't even committed.

"Let go of me!"

"I'm not letting go until you buy more Raccoons! I even made a special one just for you, Lord Liam!"

"Special?"

That piqued my interest, so Nias held up her tablet and showed me its screen. On it was an image of a Raccoon, but...

"See? It's a gold Raccoon—your favorite color! Specially made for your tacky... I mean, *distinctive* tastes! Why not use it as a substitute for the Avid? I'll make it cheap!"

These Raccoons were cute, but they reminded me of tanuki. That wasn't a problem in itself, but this gold-painted one made me think of tanuki statues I'd seen in my former life. Recalling a rather lewd feature those tended to have, I smacked the tablet out of Nias's hands.

"Hmph!"

"Nooooo! Why would you do something so mean?"

"Your tablet won't break just from that. Anyway, that thing looks stupid. I'm not buying it."

"Huh? Lord Liam, are you really saying the Raccoon looks stupid in gold, even after you tried to get me to gold-plate the Avid? I thought it was tacky, but I painted it like this just for you!"

Where does she get off calling me tacky all the time?

"If anyone else talked to me like you do, I'd snap their neck with my bare hands, you know that?"

Nias was being far too rude to a person of my stature, and I would have punished her harshly if she hadn't been the one who performed maintenance on my Avid.

Lillie quietly watched this exchange with a concerned look on her face, but when she noticed someone walking toward us, she got my attention. “Liam.”

“Hmm?”

I turned around and saw a man in a purple striped suit approaching us. The badge he wore identified him as someone related to the event. He looked like he was very proud of his brand-name outfit, along with his slicked-back hair and mustache.

“Honestly, I can’t bear to watch this,” the man said, his eyes fixed on Nias. “Could you act like an adult? If you make such a fuss in front of everyone, it discredits the whole event.”

Nias picked up her tablet and sneered at the man in distaste. “Well, if it isn’t Mason of the Sixth Weapons Factory. Came here just to pick a fight, eh? You’re as unpleasant as ever.”

So, the man’s name was Mason, and he was here to represent the Sixth Weapons Factory. He and Nias were clearly acquainted, since he was already picking a fight.

He said, “The Seventh Weapons Factory has always been a bunch of crude slobs. Your tendency to focus on performance and neglect appearance even shows in your personnel.”

“Hah! Not like you guys at the Sixth, who focus only on looks and never spare a thought for usability or ease of maintenance!”

“I’m not impressed, coming from a woman who was just bawling like a baby.”

“Arrrgh!”

The irritated salesman glared at Nias. “Anyway, I came over here to tell you you’re causing trouble for the rest of us. Do you think it’s wrong of me to warn you about your behavior? What are you doing making a scene like this, crying and complaining to such an important customer?”

“Ugh!” Nias looked to me for help as the man delivered his frankly reasonable argument.

I crossed my arms and looked away from her. “You should reflect on your

actions, Nias.”

“Lord Liam?!” She sank to the ground, shocked that I wasn’t coming to her rescue.

I sighed and faced Mason. “So, you know who I am?”

It seemed like he took one look at me and recognized me as a favored customer of the Seventh Weapons Factory.

Mason bowed his head. “I’m honored to make the acquaintance of Lord Liam of House Banfield.”

Either he’d guessed who I was from my interactions with Nias, or he’d looked into me beforehand. Either way, he made a better impression as a salesperson than Nias did.

Lillie gestured toward Nias nervously. “Um... Are you going to just leave her like that?”

“She’s fine. Right now, I’m interested in the Sixth Weapons Factory.”

Mason swept his arm toward the Sixth Weapons Factory’s display area.

“I appreciate your interest. Allow me to lead the way there.”

The Sixth Weapons Factory’s display area was very different from the one where the Raccoon was displayed. The majority of the people looking around over here were wealthy and dressed flashily.

“It looks like they attract more upscale customers,” Lillie remarked with a glance at me.

“Well, according to Nias, they neglect function and ease of maintenance to focus mainly on appearance and performance.”

Overhearing our conversation, Mason smiled. “I’m afraid you’re mistaken. It’s true that we prioritize appearance and performance, but not at the expense of all else. In fact, our next-generation units come with a thirty percent increase in usability and ease of maintenance.” He displayed some data on his tablet, but if their previous craft had scored badly in those areas, then a thirty percent

increase didn't mean much.

"Well, they still look good," I said, barely glancing at his data. "I don't mind units that are all looks and performance too much."

Mason smiled awkwardly. "Not convinced about our upgrades, Lord Liam? If that's the case, you might prefer this other item over our next-generation units."

Mason walked me past a row of mass-produced next generation craft until we came to a different mobile knight at the end. This craft stood out among all the rest at the event, and many people were crowded around it.

Lillie gazed up at it in surprise. "Is that a one-off?"

In other words, a craft that wasn't mass-produced—a one-of-a-kind item. Some information projected beside the unit indicated as such. My refurbished Avid was a one-of-a-kind *now*, but when it had first been produced, long ago, there had been a limited number of other ones of its make. It wasn't a true one-off like this mobile knight.

Mason explained proudly, "It's a cutting-edge design. Most craft in use today are mid-sized, with sleek designs, but this one far outperforms traditional units of that size. After all, we designed it with top-of-the-line performance in mind, not just stunning visuals. It was painstakingly constructed, and every single one of its parts was custom-made just for this craft."

Lillie was shocked to hear all this, covering her mouth with one hand as if in disbelief. It was a reasonable reaction. Even in a one-off craft it was normal to utilize some of the same parts used in mass-produced units, or to share some aspects of design with preexisting models. Designing each and every part of the craft to be unique was frankly unbelievable. Mobile knights were weapons used on the battlefield, but what the Sixth Weapons Factory had created was more like a luxury sports car from my past life—and you wouldn't go into battle in a sports car.

"So it's pretty much just for display, huh?"

Hearing my honest opinion, Mason gave me an affronted look.

"As I said, it's not *just* about looks. This craft is capable of a lot more than its

appearance might suggest. It's constructed from materials that will withstand anything you can dish out, so it can accomplish a lot more than a mass-produced unit could. It'd be more than a match for any other craft on the battlefield."

Mason proclaimed its perfection and then abruptly went quiet, so Lillie urged him to continue. "So in other words...?"

"In other words, it's very strong. It's the very best of what the Sixth Weapons Factory can offer—a symbol of everything we're capable of. It's going to accomplish great things."

Mason truly thought this machine could be used on the battlefield. The three of us turned our eyes back to the one-of-a-kind mobile knight. Mason had assured us it was a powerful machine, but how much strength could it actually muster with such a slender frame? I just didn't think this thing was going to be popular.

"Well, it may look and function great, but it's impossible to maintain. It'd be stupidly expensive to commission custom parts every time you need to replace parts."

Mason averted his eyes slightly as I pointed out its shortcomings. He must have considered this aspect a problem himself, but he struggled with a justification.

"O-of course it's a bit expensive to maintain, but not impossible, and that's only natural for a craft with its capabilities. We consider it battlefield-capable. Your Avid is not inexpensive to maintain— isn't that so, Lord Liam?"

"The Avid still uses standard parts, so it's not as bad as this thing," I answered with a smirk. "How *would* you handle maintenance, then?"

"W-we'd dispatch exclusive mechanics," Mason stammered. "They would install a custom hangar on the battleship or base where the craft was stationed. Th-the parts are all made-to-order, but they would be prepared as soon as possible once requested..."

Lillie shook her head slowly. What the salesman was saying was just too unbelievable. She said, "I still can't imagine a machine like this on the

battlefield. Never mind how much it costs—which I’m sure is not cheap.”

Mason tapped his fingers on his tablet’s screen and projected an outrageous number in front of us.

Lillie practically screamed when she saw it. “Eep! Th-that much?!”

Mason scrambled to push the merits of owning this mobile knight. “You’d be in possession of an unparalleled craft! It’s actually a small price to pay for quality like this. Plus, if you put an ace pilot inside, you’d get even more out of it!”

I found it amusing how hard he was trying, so I poked fun at him a bit. “I think you’d still get more out of a battleship. In fact, how many ships could you buy at that price? Adding in maintenance costs, you could probably put a whole fleet together instead.”

“W-well...”

“Plus, I don’t think this thing will see any battle.”

“Huh?”

Mason and the other guys at the Sixth probably didn’t realize it. I definitely liked how the thing looked, and I could imagine buying it just to amuse myself, but I didn’t know if I would really spend that much money on it. I might if I thought Amagi wouldn’t be pissed at me for it.

Lillie put a hand to her chin. “I do think it looks great, but it’s almost too slender... It’s actually rather feminine.”

Lillie was right: the mobile knight did have a distinctly feminine silhouette. Its chest bulged slightly, while its waist was pinched. It was an appealing design, but I felt it was too delicate-looking for a knight to pilot.

Mason didn’t agree. “Thinner frames are more popular nowadays, so I don’t see that as a problem. Plus, don’t forget there are plenty of female knights out there, and I’m sure one of them would love a chance to pilot this. Its appearance is wonderfully unique!”

Oh, I was sure many people would like the machine’s unique appearance, but the problem was whether those people could afford it or not. I gave the

salesman a fighter's perspective. "Anyone with the cash to buy this would definitely show it off, but they wouldn't take it into a fight. Appearances are important, but what's important is looking *strong*."

Lillie nodded, agreeing with me. "Yeah. Plenty of people would like it, but the only ones who could afford it are wealthy nobles, right? Which means it would likely never see battle, so there's no point in its high specs..."

Despite all that, the craft might actually have sold just as a showpiece if it were easy to maintain, but the ridiculous maintenance costs were just too much. Even if a rich person bought it for their own amusement, its ridiculously high specs would be rendered pointless. This thing would likely never garner any sort of battle achievements. The Sixth had totally miscalculated with this machine.

Mason was sweating now. "Ha ha ha... W-well, we've only just unveiled it. Maybe buyers will flood in and we'll have an auction and—"

A pale-faced colleague of Mason's came rushing over to interrupt him. "Mason!"

"Can't you see I'm speaking with some customers?"

"People hate it!"

"Huh?!" Mason exclaimed.

His colleague went on, almost panicked. "People are showing interest in our mass-produced units, but not as many as we'd like. But this one? Nothing. Oh, people love coming over to look at it, but once they see the specs and maintenance costs? Sales are completely off the table. Frankly, people hate it. Someone told me we have no idea what our customers want."

It seemed like the Sixth Weapons Factory had made an incredible mistake. Slender frames were in fashion now, sure, and they had been for a few hundred years. Feminine-looking units were also not unheard of, but really only the rich were interested. If the Sixth kept looking, they could probably find one or two people willing to splurge on this mobile knight as a status symbol, but it wouldn't find use on the battlefield as Mason had hoped. It'd be like taking an expensive sports car on a rough, off-road trail.

Three subordinates of the man in the red mask had snuck into the mobile knight event. These grunts in his underground organization had disguised themselves as ordinary citizens, and once they entered the venue, they sat on a bench in a rest area to discuss their plans.

“He’s got a cute little girlfriend with him.”

“She wasn’t mentioned in our briefing. Did he pick her up recently?”

“Must be nice, being a rich noble.”

They were curious about the unknown woman in the white dress, but all they could do was act on their orders.

“We were only supposed to stir things up here, but now we’ve got ourselves a major target. What did the chief say about it?”

Their initial orders had been to cause an incident at the venue, but since Liam was here, they had to contact their boss. They spoke openly about all this, but the people passing by them paid no attention to their conversation, hearing only fragments of apparent small talk.

“He said if it’s possible, drag him into the chaos and kill him. The woman’s unidentified, so if she gets away, we’re gonna have to do a follow-up on her.”

The grunts’ plan was to steal the event’s mobile knights and go on a rampage with them. They would make it look like a riot by anarchists who were protesting the way the Empire was ruled.

“Let’s get this over with.”

One of them stood up, pulled his hat down low to cover his face, and set out for the mobile knight he had chosen as his target—the Nemain. The other two stood up to take action as well.

The man with the hat smiled widely. “You picked the wrong people to mess with, kid.”

The men would cause a commotion and assassinate Liam in the process, which Linus had hoped to achieve anyway. Then, Linus himself would send in the military to quell the fake riot, improving his reputation within the Empire.

When this was all over, he'd never have to worry about Liam again.

In the exhibit area for the Sixth Weapons Factory, a tired-looking Mason guided Lillie and me up an entrance ramp to the mobile knight's cockpit. The torso of the slim mobile knight was just as compact as the rest of it, but the cockpit was more than wide enough for the three of us to enter together, thanks to the use of spatial magic.

"It's just how I like it in here," I said, settling into the well-designed pilot's seat, and that encouraged Mason to doggedly keep up his attempts to promote the machine.

"It's the most comfortable ride you'll ever have! We've put everything we have into every aspect of this machine, after all. You could use it as your spare craft, Lord Liam—but it would function more than well enough as your *main* craft!"

"Hey, the Avid will always be my craft, and I'm still not comfortable with the way this one looks." I gave it to him straight, and Mason's shoulders slumped.

"I see..."

Lillie was looking around the cockpit with some interest. She seemed unsure of whether or not it was all right to touch anything. The way she reached out and then pulled her hand back made her seem reserved and timid.

"If you're curious how it feels," I said, watching her, "just have a seat."

"Is that okay?" Lillie asked, so I gave her my permission.

"Mason won't mind."

"All right, then."

I moved from the pilot's seat and Lillie sat down happily in my place. As she climbed in, she almost exposed what was under her skirt, but Mason and I looked away. *Guess Mason's a gentleman like I am.*

Oblivious, Lillie gripped the control sticks excitedly. "Wow! It adjusted to me as soon as I sat down!"

The moment Lillie sat in the seat, the control sticks and foot pedals shifted to accommodate her positioning perfectly. It took only a few seconds.

Mason explained proudly, “The seat calculates positioning automatically, based on the pilot’s body.”

Quite a bit of money and skill had been spent on this craft. It would still lose to the Avid, but there was a certain allure in the idea of the ultimate one-off model. It was a gigantic luxury item, plain and simple.

“I might have bought it if it just looked cooler,” I lamented, and Mason perked up at my words.

“You know, with some additional armor you’d be able to modify the machine’s outer appearance, Lord Liam.”

“I said I’m not buying it.”

Meanwhile, Lillie was still entranced, ignoring our conversation. “Amazing. I’d love to pilot a machine like this one day.”

Her eyes twinkled like a child’s. On the outside, she might have looked refined, but on the inside she was still rather cute and innocent.

As I watched her, Mason whispered to me, “Your companion seems rather fond of it, Lord Liam. What do you say? Why not give it to her?”

“Would you give a woman a mobile knight as a gift?”

Sure, it was more expensive than jewelry or other such luxury items, but I couldn’t imagine a woman would be happy receiving such a thing. I was sure even Lillie would be taken aback if a man she’d just met suddenly gifted her with a mobile knight.

As I glowered at Mason, worn out by his aggressive sales pitch, a blast of air hit my face from the open hatch. At the same time, I heard explosions and screams coming from outside.

Mason poked his head through the hatch to have a look. “What’s going —*ack!*”

I grabbed him and pulled him back, sensing that danger waited for us just outside.

Lillie got up from the pilot's seat and rushed over to me. I hadn't expected her to panic and start crying or anything, but she was still remarkably calm considering the chaos going on outside. She said, "Liam, something bad is happening here."

"You're tougher than you look," I said. "I think you could stand to act a little cuter to match your looks though." Lillie was concerned about what was going on outside, but I couldn't help but respond with something unrelated.

In return, she flushed and yelled, "This is hardly the time!"

"You've had some martial training, am I right? I don't know if you've seen combat, but are you a knight, at least?"

I hadn't intended to probe Lillie for her background, but if violence was occurring outside, the situation had changed. I needed to know how much I could expect from her if we were going to get out of this safely.

"You noticed?" Lillie's eyes widened in surprise.

I laughed. "Ha! Who do you think I am? Anyway, it's too dangerous to go outside now. I saw some guys out there on the lookout for us."

I could tell from the sounds coming from outside that mobile knights were stomping around out there. Someone was wreaking havoc with them, and they probably had more people on the ground too.

Mason had crouched close to the floor, looking like he wasn't enjoying this excitement at all. "They must be insane to start something like this on the Capital Planet!"

"I'd say that sounds about right."

"In any case, we have to get this machine somewhere safe," Mason said, scrambling toward the pilot's seat.

I grabbed his shoulder to stop him. "Hey, lend this thing to me. If there are people attacking in mobile knights, I'll take care of 'em in this. It's a pain to let them keep at it."

Mason adamantly declined. "No! I absolutely cannot lend you this craft! If you talk to my boss, maybe you can use one of the mass-produced units..."

We didn't have time to go find his boss, and I didn't want to in any case. I pulled a card out of my pocket and flashed it to Mason. "All right, then—I'll buy it."

My money had spoken, and Mason promptly bowed so low to me he exceeded ninety degrees. "Thank you so much for your purchase, Lord Liam!"

I wasn't sure about Mason as a person, but he did impress me as a salesman. I kinda liked the guy.

Lillie was dumbfounded that I'd bought the mobile knight on the spot. "Are you serious?"

I sat down in the pilot's seat and the control sticks adjusted their positioning for me. When I gripped them, the hatch sealed and the view outside was projected on the inner walls of the cockpit.

"This thing really *does* have good specs." As I got a feel for the controls, I could already tell that the machine was functioning better than a Nemain or Teumessa.

"Now then... How 'bout I crush those idiots making a scene out there?"

Flames and smoke filled the mobile knight exhibition venue. Screaming people ran about in a panic, and one of the masked man's subordinates chased them from inside a Nemain-class model mobile knight. As the machine stomped after the fleeing people, it swung the Nemain's giant-bladed sword.

"If you don't run faster, I'll squash you flat," said the grunt inside the Nemain's cockpit, caring nothing for human lives. He then complained, "This would have been easier with the heavy armaments loaded up."

By this time, more members from their organization had infiltrated the venue to steal inside and activate other mobile knights, spreading further havoc. Soon enough, most of the brand-new mobile knights on display, the Raccoon included, had been stolen.

"These Nemains are wasted on House Banfield," said the grunt, impressed by the craft's high specs. "It's certainly good enough to be in use as their official

craft though. It'd be pretty funny to kill Liam with this, wouldn't it?"

Liam would be the laughingstock of noble society if he was killed by a machine of the type his own army utilized. The grunt was imagining this scenario when there was a sudden explosion. One of his rampaging friends flew by in front of him, blasted out of all the smoke and flames to crash to the ground. It didn't look like an accident. The grunt in the Nemain heard his comrade's voice over the cockpit's speaker.

"H-help—"

"Hey, what's going on?"

He walked the Nemain over to his friend and was trying to pick up the fallen machine when another craft came flying out of the smoke and flames. This mobile knight was the feminine-looking craft that had stood out among the other units on display. This one-off model had been getting so much attention that the grunts hadn't been able to steal it.

"Whoa!" said the grunt in the Nemain. "That thing's going to be trouble."

Being such a pricey item, the grunt had thought the staff would remove the one-off from the venue quickly, but here it was, standing in front of him. The feminine mobile knight approached the grunt's comrade and thrust the giant sword in its right hand straight into the downed craft's cockpit. From how direct the blow was, the grunt could tell that whoever was inside the one-off was a pro.

"You've got some experience, eh? Ground Squad, do you read? Anyone have eyes on Liam?" While he waited for a response, he considered fleeing. No response came, and the grunt grimaced. "Were they taken out...?"

The enemy craft pulled its sword from his dead comrade's craft and came striding toward him. Suddenly, to his relief, three more of his comrades in stolen mobile knights surrounded the one-off and came at it at once—but just as suddenly, the enemy craft cut down all of them in a blur of movement.

"Are its specs that top-class?" the grunt said in awe. "No, it's gotta be an ace piloting it!"

Communications opened between the enemy craft and his own, and he saw

Liam's face on the cockpit's monitor. *"Sound only? How about showing me your face?"*

Liam couldn't see inside the grunt's cockpit. The grunt ground his teeth. "So that's where he went."

He hadn't expected Liam to be the one piloting the feminine craft, but this was an opportunity. *He has skill, but the real reason Liam's been able to make a name for himself in battle is because his own mobile knight has such ridiculous specs. Which means...*

That Liam could lose here. The grunt drove his machine forward, confident in the abilities of the Nemain. "Don't underestimate me, you brat!"

I used to be called an ace on the battlefield before I joined the organization. I'll show you the difference real experience can make...

The Nemain took a quick step forward, beginning its dash, but the scenery around him abruptly changed. By the time he noticed this fact, the cockpit of the Nemain was already shaking as the unit was driven to the ground. Before he realized what had happened, he heard Liam's voice.

"You could have at least put up a fight."

A second later, the feminine craft's foot crushed the Nemain's cockpit.

While the Sixth Weapons Factory's prized craft had a serious flaw when it came to ease of maintenance, its specs *were* insanely impressive.

"It's cruel to compare this thing to mass-produced units."

In fact, the remains of mass-produced units littered the exhibition venue, turned to smoking wrecks by the one-off I just bought. One of those wrecks was a Nemain too.

A communication window opened up in the air before me, and Mason was there. He had left the cockpit for a secondary operator's compartment. "So, *what do you think of the Sixth's cutting-edge gem?*"

"It's not as good as the Avid, but it is pretty powerful. I like that it's strong despite its thin frame, like you said. But why does the cockpit shrink in battle?"

Now I knew why Mason had shifted to another compartment. The cockpit had been spacious before the fight, but now was small. It would have been more than enough room for one person, but it was tight with two.

“Well, there’s no need to leave the seat during a battle, and it’d be a waste of energy to continue using spatial magic to maintain a larger space.”

“Still, it’s a little too tight in here.”

Mason glanced not at me but at Lillie, who was sitting in my lap. *“A pilot doesn’t usually bring a companion along for the ride.”*

Lillie was curled up in my lap, her face flushed. Her head was pressed to my chest so she wouldn’t obstruct my field of view, making it look as though she were clinging to me tight.

“I didn’t think this would happen...” Lillie apologized to me, sounding mortified. We couldn’t have known the cockpit would shrink during combat.



I sighed. “It was my mistake, so don’t worry about it. Sorry though, but you’re gonna have to bear with it for now. So, how many machines are left?”

I scanned over the area, looking for any remaining enemies. Mason informed me of their exact number and locations. *“There are three units left. The Seventh’s Raccoon will be a problem.”*

He grimaced at this admission, indirectly praising the model developed by the Seventh Weapons Factory. He changed his tune about the craft’s merits now that Nias wasn’t around—his honest opinion was that it really was a good machine.

“Well, I’ve always wanted to fight against a Raccoon.”

I moved the control sticks and pressed down lightly on the pedals, commanding the feminine craft to release the crushed enemy craft it had been holding in one of its hand-like manipulators. I directed the manipulator to pick up a sword stuck into the ground, and now I was equipped with two blades.

Still clinging to me, Lillie looked up in surprise. “Dual wielding, huh? But you...”

“What, you know my sword fighting style too? Well, normally I end things with one blade, but I want to play around a bit.”

This was indeed child’s play. This thing had nearly unparalleled abilities. Now that I thought of it, what was this thing’s name, anyway?

“Mason, what’s this craft’s name?”

“We call it the Vanadís.”

Well, that’s fitting, I thought.

“The Vanadís? I kind of like that,” Lillie murmured.

“Yeah.”

I felt better now that I knew what to call this thing. But then Mason went on, *“Incidentally, Lord Liam...”*

“What is it?”

“I’m recording the Vanadís’s first battle, but so far, the action’s been too brief

since the craft is so powerful. Could you take your time a little?"

"What?"

"I was hoping to use the video for an advertisement."

This guy's salesman spirit was really something. As I was thinking this, I watched two mobile knights come at the Vanadís with their blades drawn. Fortunately, heavy armaments hadn't been allowed inside the exhibition space, and the small arms were also merely ornamental at the moment, so the mobile knights could only wield melee weapons.

"Enemies on both sides," Lillie warned me as the two craft attempted to catch me in a pincer maneuver.

"Seems they have some real combat experience. Are the pilots knights? Unfortunately, they picked the wrong guy to mess with."

The Vanadís spun around, swinging the blades in both of its hands. I repelled my enemies' attacks and cut them down in the same movement. Maybe it was more accurate to say I smashed them than cut them. It was surprising even for me to take in: a slim, mid-sized mobile knight completely overpowering brand new, stronger-looking craft of other makes.

Finally, it was just the hijacked Raccoon that was left, and I faced off against it. The large craft hung back a little as if afraid of me, wielding a giant axe.

This whole situation confounded Lillie. "Why would they start something like this on the Capital Planet?"

I had no idea what they were thinking myself, so I simply said, "Who cares? They raised their hands against me, and that's the reason they're dying."

It had been a pretty ambitious way of stirring up trouble, and these people had to have been fairly skilled to hijack the mobile knights, but in the end it didn't look to me like they'd accomplished much. I'd pretty much taken care of the threat at this point, but I felt bad for getting Lillie involved.

"Oh, screw this!"

From what I could hear over the sound-only communications channel between me and the last enemy pilot, I surmised that he planned to run. Sure

enough, he turned his back to me and activated his thrusters. It was smart to run from an enemy you knew you couldn't beat, but he had made the decision too late.

Before he could escape, I had the Vanadís activate its own thrusters, and it moved even faster than I anticipated. My body was pressed back into my seat, and Lillie clung to me even tighter. I wrapped my left arm around her to support her.

"Bear with me—I'll finish this quickly."

"R-right..." She nodded.

I looked back to the fleeing Raccoon and saw it was already in range of my swords. I swung both blades and pierced its heavy armor. When the blades penetrated from the shoulders down to the machine's middle, an electrical discharge shot forth, followed by the Raccoon exploding right in front of me. The force sent the Vanadís flying, but I was able to spin in the air and land it on its feet. I bent the craft's knees at the right moment to absorb the shock of the landing.

"Sturdier than it looks. Maintenance will be a real pain, but I could see taking it out into a battle or two if this is how it performs."

I was distracted from these thoughts when a closeup of a teary Nias appeared on my communication monitor.

"Why'd you destroy my Raccoon?"

"What do you want?"

"Look at you, riding around in that showoff Sixth's machine and making a mess! You're too mean, Lord Liam! I can't believe you're throwing aside the long relationship you've had with us and jumping ship for the Sixth! So you're done with the Seventh, is that it? You're the worst, Lord Liam!!!"

She performed this speech as if she were on a melodramatic soap opera, and I heaved a sigh of annoyance.

"Lord Liam, the military has arrived," Mason interjected. *"They're requesting that you shut down the Vanadís and exit the cockpit."*

A squad to quell the incident had finally arrived.

“A bit late.”

“You resolved the situation very quickly, Lord Liam. There would have been a lot more damage had you not intervened.”

Mason sounded ecstatic, obviously pleased by the Vanadís’s performance. Outside, members of the Sixth’s team had come out of hiding to rejoice at the display of the craft’s overwhelming abilities. These guys were as bad as the Seventh, just in a different way.

“I’ll be right out.” I cut communications, and as I powered down the Vanadís and prepared to exit the cockpit, the space expanded around me. “Sorry for getting you involved in this,” I said to Lillie, who still sat on my lap.

“I-it’s all right.” She looked up at me, her eyes watery. Her cheeks were somewhat flushed, and her breathing slightly labored. She must have been exhausted, because she seemed a little out of it, as though dazed after the danger we’d been through. I picked her up and she struggled in my arms, embarrassed. “H-hey!”

“Calm down—we’re getting out in a second. The military’s here now, so I’m sure they’ll want to question us. Do you need to rest for a bit first?”

I figured it’d be hard for her to have to be questioned while she was tired like that, so I asked if she needed a moment. Lillie glanced at a bracelet on her wrist. The bracelet responded to her gaze and displayed the current time.

“Ah! Wh-what do I do? I need to get back!”

Apparently, she wouldn’t make it in time for something if she stayed around for questioning, she explained to me with tears in her eyes.

“You’re in trouble?”

“Umm... Yeah.”

Her face had been red a moment ago, but now it had gone white. Apparently she needed to be somewhere else, fast.

“All right, then. Leave the questioning to me, and you can head back on your own. I’ll have some of my men watch over you.”

“Is that okay?”

“They won’t need both of us to tell them what happened.”

I was sure the military would rather hear things from the both of us, but I didn’t care. The hatch opened and one of the Vanadís’s hands rose up to the cockpit. I set Lillie down in its palm and she gave me an odd look.

“I’m really sorry,” she said. “I’m being so selfish...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you again, right?”

“Huh?” Lillie looked surprised to hear that I hoped to see her again.

The Vanadís’s hand lowered her to the ground. Lillie then ran off, stealing more than a few glances back at me. As I watched her go through the open hatch, Kukuri appeared from an inner wall of the cockpit.

His top half stuck out of the wall as he asked me what I wanted to do with Lillie. “Shall we follow her?”

“That won’t be necessary. Just make sure she gets away from this area safely.”

“Very well.”

If I had Kukuri’s men follow Lillie all the way to where she needed to be, they could easily find out who she really was, but I didn’t want to be sneaky with her. I had a feeling I’d be seeing her again anyway.

She really was an interesting one. At first glance, she seemed innocent and fragile, but it turned out she had martial training and liked mobile knights. I remembered a friend from my past life, Nitta, describing anime characters like this to me with the term “gap moe.”

I realized with some surprise that I was smiling, and shook my head to clear it. Noticing the return of seriousness to my face, Kukuri told me what he knew about the incident that had just occurred.

“The people behind this incident were trained.”

I’d left the hotel on a whim today, but I wasn’t stupid enough to walk around unprotected. Kukuri and his men had been guarding me, of course. I’d taken out

the guys rampaging in the mobile knights, but Kukuri and his team had taken care of those on the ground.

“Trained?”

“It would seem they’re all former knights, so they were likely mercenaries hired to do dirty work. They all had Army records, but some data was missing.”

“Colleagues of yours?” I guessed they were in the same shady business as Kukuri, but they hadn’t seemed as capable at fighting as his people.

“I would guess they were easily disposable pawns.”

“Capture any of them?”

“They immediately died upon capture. They were well-trained pawns, at least.”

So whoever had hired them had used skilled pilots as disposable grunts. Linus came to mind right away, of course.

“Linus?” I asked Kukuri, but he didn’t have an answer for me.

“There’s a high possibility, but that’s all I can say at this time.”

“Well, you guys are up,” I ordered Kukuri. “Show me what I’m paying you for.”

If a shady organization was after me, I would throw my own shady organization right back at them.

Kukuri’s response was short and firm. “Certainly.”

Back at the hotel House Banfield was renting, government officials and knights were gathered in the lounge to chatter about the commotion that had occurred at the nearby mobile knight event.

“So what’s going on?” one official asked.

“I don’t know, but whoever’s responsible for causing so much trouble on the Capital Planet is going to be in big trouble.”

“Lord Liam got caught up in it, but I hear he’s safe. Thank goodness.”

When Ciel came into the lounge, she saw the relieved looks on the faces of

these government officials and knights. Apparently, Liam had been present at the venue where the attack had occurred. Everyone had calmed down now that his safety had been confirmed, but the hotel had been in a frenzy for a time. Ciel, who'd been exploring outside the hotel and was now getting a look around inside it, was relieved to hear this news herself.

"I didn't think there'd be so much trouble on my first day here," she muttered. "I'm glad it wasn't more serious."

She had formed some personal opinions about Liam, but she'd also been worried when she heard he'd gotten caught up in the chaos. After all, he was the head of the house that was going to be looking after her soon. He may have been a philanderer, but it wasn't like she wanted him to die for it.

Ciel waited in the lounge until the female knight who'd been assigned as her guide came to find her. The woman presently wore a suit instead of a knight's garb and approached Ciel with a smile.

"Lord Kurt has just returned to his room, Lady Ciel."

"Really?!"

Ciel had been waiting in the lounge for news because she was worried about her brother after hearing about the terror attack. She didn't know what she would do if Kurt had been caught up in the chaos too. She had tried to contact him but couldn't get through, so she had this knight check on his whereabouts.

"Yes, Lady Ciel. He was in his room cutting his hair. His marriage meeting is coming up, so he was trying on his clothes for the meeting and had turned off his tablet."

"Oh, thank goodness... Thank you so much for checking."

Deeply relieved, Ciel headed for Kurt's room.

As Liam's close friend, Kurt had been given a luxury suite at the hotel.

"Kurt, it's Ciel!" Ciel called at the door. Some time went by. "Huh? Can't he hear me?"

Just when she was starting to worry that Kurt wasn't really in his room after

all, his face was projected on the door's surface.

"Ciel, you're here."

"Kurt!"

"Wait a second, okay? My room's a mess, so let's talk in the hotel restaurant. It's the perfect time for dinner anyway."

"Okay!"

Kurt emerged from his room, and together he and Ciel headed for the restaurant.

The man in the red mask had watched the attack on the event venue from a distance. As soon as he realized his men had failed, he made a decision and passed it on to one of his underlings.

"The commotion was enough for now. Make sure any of the grunts who survived are taken care of."

"Yes, sir."

When the underling heard the words "taken care of," he immediately pressed a button on a device he carried. The button remotely took care of—killed—the remaining grunts involved in the venue attack. Even those who had escaped capture were disposed of. With these pawns dead, they didn't have to worry about anyone interrogating them. By use of science and magic, some investigation was doubtlessly possible, but they wanted to eliminate as many clues as they could. Also, an investigation would take time. Even if investigators managed to learn about their organization, with their connections and the right people dead, the case would be dropped.

The underling asked the man in the red mask about the mysterious team that had taken out their ground crew at the event. "We managed to cause a commotion, but we lost all of the pawns we utilized. We can't underestimate House Banfield's operatives... Who could they be?"

Their grunts had been nowhere near the level of these operatives. Yes, their own men had been well-trained, but House Banfield's operatives had still

defeated them easily.

The man in the red mask shrugged. “We’ll learn more about them when it’s time to move in close ourselves. And it’s about that time now.”

Chapter 6:

The Darkness of the Empire

THE NIGHT OF THE INCIDENT, Cleo was finding it very hard to relax in his room at the palace. He couldn't fall asleep, and lay in his bed sweating.

"This is terrible," he muttered.

He'd been living in fear ever since the day Linus had declared war on him, wondering when Linus's assassins would come after him.

Cleo found his own timidity pathetic. Frustrated, he got out of bed and went over to his window, looking out at the night.

"That terror attack on the Capital Planet today... What could that have been about?"

Cleo had heard about the incident Liam had become involved in and knew it must've been contributing to his inability to sleep. He stood deep in thought, and...

Men with masks slowly began to rise up from out of the floor behind him. Cleo turned around and took a startled step back when he noticed the intruders. He drew the sword he'd been carrying with him everywhere lately, manifesting a laser blade.

"Who are you?!"

There was an indescribable aura about these masked men. They had a different air or vibe to them than that of knights, and one that Cleo found incredibly dangerous.

When the masked men had fully materialized from the floor, they were holding the severed heads of similarly masked men. Sweat was truly pouring off Cleo by now.

Who are these people? What do they want?!

Surely they were here to kill him. He was just about to call for help when his

bedroom door burst open and Tia rushed in.

“Are you safe, Prince Cleo?”

Tia held her rapier in her hand, her blade and body covered in blood that wasn't her own. She had obviously been fighting a fierce battle.

Cleo alerted Tia to the intruders. “Watch out—these guys are dangerous!”

The “dangerous” guys opened a path for Tia when they saw her, however.

“Wha—?”

Tia approached the baffled Cleo and made sure he was okay. “Are you unharmed?”

Cleo looked at the masked men in surprise and finally understood. The reason they showed themselves to him but hadn't attacked was that they had no intention of killing him.

“They're on our side?”

“Yes. They've just thwarted an attempt on your life.” When Tia had confirmed that Cleo was safe, she got on her tablet and spoke with someone. “It's me. Yes... Understood. Lord Liam's life is the highest priority.”

Tia ended the call and explained the situation to Cleo. “Prince Linus has made his move. He's sent assassins after you, and after Mr. Elliot of the Clave Firm.”

“Assassins?”

Cleo recalled shady characters he knew had access to the palace and looked at the heads the masked men were carrying. *Is that them? I can't recognize anyone because of those masks.*

The masks worn by the dangerous strangers and the severed heads they carried were a problem. After all, the masks were all identical, so at a glance it was impossible to tell who were enemies and who were allies.

“Are you sure these guys are really on our side? They look the same as the dead ones.”

Were people from the same organization working against each other, hired by opposing factions? Rather than give Cleo an answer, Tia implored him to hurry.

“You’ll know more later—right now we need to move you out of here. Lord Liam’s worried about you.”

“All right...” Cleo put his trust in Tia.

A meeting room in the Clave Firm’s headquarters was bathed in blood.

Elliot sat in a chair with his fingers calmly laced atop his crossed legs, his demeanor undisturbed as he looked down at a group of captured people. The prisoners sat on the floor in front of him, with the bodies of hired assassins lying all around them.

“So you betrayed me on Prince Linus’s orders, eh? I never expected there would be traitors among the top brass of this company.”

The captured men all wore expensive business suits. They were the leadership of the Clave Firm, and they pleaded with Elliot desperately.

“I’m so sorry, President!”

“W-we were just thinking about what was best for the company!”

“We’ll never betray you again, we swear!”

Masked men stood around Elliot. One of them, spinning a knife in his hand, brought his face close to the traitors and showed them his red eyes. One after another, the business executives collapsed, foaming at the mouth.

These other assassins had been dispatched by Liam to protect Elliot, and it was a good thing he had. The windows of the meeting room had been pierced, and spiderweb cracks covered the panes. They showed the aftermath of a sniper’s attempt on Elliot’s life.

“President Elliot,” one of the masked men began in an eerily indifferent voice, “it would appear these assassins chose to eliminate you at the same time Prince Linus made his move with the sniper.”

Elliot nodded. “I see. I’m lucky to still be here.”

Elliot’s back was damp with sweat. *I didn’t know Liam had people like this working for him.*

He had thought Liam would send some strong knights as bodyguards, but it was Kukuri's men who'd appeared to defend him instead. Almost a dozen masked assassins had come to kill him, yet Kukuri's men had taken them out easily. The sniper outside had already been dealt with as well.

The masked men spoke amongst themselves.

"Lord Liam?"

"The chief's guarding him."

"Then he'll be safe."

Elliot wasn't sure what to think, watching his mysterious guards chat so casually in front of the bodies of the people he'd just seen them kill.

If I ever crossed Lord Liam, I'd end up the same as these guys. He was afraid of Liam, but he also found it reassuring to have him as an ally. I'm going to make good use of this connection we have, Lord Liam. If I want to stand at the top of this company and make it even greater, I'll need your power.

Elliot had been prepared for violence ever since taking over this company. That day had finally come, and he was still alive. Despite his nervousness, he rejoiced in the fact that he had such a powerful ally on his side.

Meanwhile, a fierce fight was underway between masked men on the roof of the hotel where Liam was staying. Fighting Kukuri was the man in the red mask, one of the top members of his organization, and that man in the red mask was nervous.

"Who are you people?" he demanded. "How do you use the same techniques we do?"

The reason for his anxiety was that Kukuri and his men could do everything his own organization could do. He'd realized right away that they used the exact same techniques, not merely similar methods.

Kukuri replied, "The same? Oh, they're not the same. You people are only imitating what we developed."

"What are you talking about?" the man in the red mask shouted, confused.

Kukuri laughed heartily, his shoulders shaking with mirth. “You don’t belong to us. You stole our techniques and formed a new organization, that would be my guess. It would explain your shoddy style. You failed to properly maintain the oral tradition.”

The man in the red mask looked around frantically. His men were falling one after another, which was only causing his anxiety to rise. He decided the only wise thing to do was flee, but Kukuri’s men instantly surrounded him to block his escape. Several of them touched the ground and manifested glowing runes that prevented him from using his teleportation magic. Since they used the same techniques, they knew exactly how to counter him.

After determining that he wouldn’t be able to escape, the man actually became more composed. “You’re trying to confuse me, but it won’t work.”

It had been two thousand years since Kukuri and his men had been petrified. He assumed that long ago his people’s techniques had been stolen and a new organization had started up, but if the origin story of those techniques hadn’t been passed down properly, it was only natural that these modern assassins would doubt Kukuri’s version of events. From their perspective, these methods had always been passed down in their own organization. They had no idea that the originators of those ancient skills could have revived here in the present.

“Confuse you?” said Kukuri. “Hmm, you’re not very trusting, but then I suppose that comes with the territory. In any case, there’s no need for the two of us to come to an understanding. Let’s finish this.”

Kukuri closed the distance between the man in the red mask and himself, reaching out to his opponent. The masked man bent back to avoid him, but Kukuri managed to grab the bottom of the man’s mask and tear it away, exposing his mouth.

The man was smiling. “You got me.”

The moment he said that, eight jointed, insect-like legs burst out of his back. The legs spread wide in the air and then closed around Kukuri, trapping him inside as if in the bars of a cage. The sharp tips of the legs pierced Kukuri’s back, emerging through his chest. Kukuri’s men rushed toward him in surprise, weapons drawn.

The man in the red mask continued smiling, prepared for his own death but happy he wouldn't be going alone. "I'm taking you all down with me!"

He activated a bomb that had been hidden inside his body from the start—an explosive powerful enough to level the entire hotel. The man felt triumphant that he had completed his mission in exchange for his own life, but Kukuri, who he'd thought was already dead, lifted his head.

Kukuri looked completely unfazed by the eight legs that had skewered his torso. Red eyes flashing, he thrust his hand straight into the other man's chest and seized the implanted bomb. When Kukuri pulled the bomb free of his enemy's body, it was disarmed.

Spitting up blood, the man in the red mask stared at Kukuri in disbelief. "How?"

"You let your guard down too soon. This is a wonderful technique though, I must admit. It's not one of ours. We're going to thoroughly investigate you."

Kukuri reached behind himself, grabbed the spider legs in both fists, and yanked them out of his body. From how he was still functioning, he couldn't have taken a lethal injury at all. Meanwhile, his men had restrained the man in the red mask. Kukuri looked him over with great interest, feeling his back.

"A hidden weapon modeled after a spider, eh? The legs inject poison too. Hmm... Not bad, but not great either. I have to say I'm intrigued, though. Do you have others like it that mimic the characteristics of different creatures?"

One of his men interrupted Kukuri. "Lord Liam wants to see you."

Kukuri was reluctant to cut short his examination, but he had to prioritize his employer's wishes. "All right, I want half of you men to collect these corpses and study them thoroughly. They're our juniors, so treat them well, alright? And let's keep this one alive for a bit longer, since I'd like to see what we can get from him before he dies."

The man in the red mask was just barely conscious. Kukuri's men began treating his injuries while they covered his mouth, while Kukuri himself headed down into the hotel to meet with Liam.

When I summoned Kukuri to me, he had already taken care of the assassins.

“You done?”

“Yes,” Kukuri reported. “Prince Linus is serious. The people he sent after you this time were nothing like the grunts at the event earlier today.”

“He’s too simpleminded.”

It was true that I provoked Linus by spreading gossip about his deal with the United Kingdom, but I didn’t expect him to send assassins after me so boldly in retaliation. As an Imperial prince, he should have considered the consequences of such an impulsive move.

“I’m disappointed in Linus.”

Kukuri guessed at his motivations. “He’s in the middle of his conflict with Prince Calvin right now, so perhaps he wanted to take care of you quickly.”

“He thought we’d be that easy, huh?”

Obviously, Linus had underestimated me, and I didn’t like that much. It was fine and dandy if my enemies were unprepared for me, but it rubbed me the wrong way if they took me lightly. Still, from Linus’s point of view Calvin was his main enemy, and House Banfield was nothing more than a nuisance that he could take care of at any time... And thanks to that, the situation was advantageous to me now. It’d be easiest to take them out one at a time, after all.

Linus was a small fry; I could take him off the board without breaking a sweat. If he lost his temper that recklessly, trying to erase me as if I was only an afterthought, then I was sure in a conflict between just himself and Calvin he’d be the loser eventually.

“In any case, if he has assassins strong enough that you consider them skilled, that means Cleo’s in real danger, isn’t he?”

“We were able to protect Cleo. He’s safe.”

Kukuri was beyond competent and thorough. He could always be relied on, unlike two other two idiots I could think of. I counted myself fortunate for having encountered such a formidable individual. Maybe that had been due to

the Guide's influence as well. I really owed the Guide a lot. I'd have to make sure to reach out to him with feelings of gratitude later.

Right now, though, I wanted to make sure for myself that Cleo was safe.

"I'm gonna go see Cleo."

"Very well," said Kukuri.

When Linus received the report, he was speechless. His first reaction was to throw loose objects from his desk at the man in the mask who knelt before him—the man in the red mask's successor.

"You *failed*? And you people consider yourself the darkness of the Empire? I went out of my way to cause a major scene on the Capital Planet and I don't even have anything to show for it?"

Linus wasn't just incensed because the assassins had failed to kill Liam. No, on top of that, the captured executives at the Clave Firm had exposed their connection to Linus and confirmed to Liam that the hired assassins worked for him.

"I had that team cause chaos *here*, on the Capital Planet itself, as a smokescreen to help you get the job done! What are you gonna do about this?"

"I apologize."

The Capital Planet was the site of the emperor's palace, so causing any sort of major incident there was an extra-serious crime. Linus might be royalty, but even he would be punished severely if it got out that he was behind the terror attack. Still, at the time he'd thought his risky plan would bear results.

Linus had orchestrated the fake riot at the mobile knight event not only so he could look like a hero for sending the military in himself, but primarily as cover for the assassination of Cleo and Liam. The military's attention would be diverted, and the assassinations could be blamed on the imaginary anarchists.

Unexpectedly, Liam had gone to the event himself and had ended up resolving the situation easily, coming out of it unscathed. Too impatient for subtlety, Linus had then sent the assassins to the hotel, but now that had failed,

too. Whereas Linus had thought Cleo and Liam would soon be out of the way, now it seemed he was the one who was doomed.

The successor to the man in the red mask was just as panicked as Linus. “The enemy assassins know all the same techniques we use. They’re at least as skilled as we are!”

Liam had people working for him who were just as dangerous as his hired assassins? A chill went down Linus’s spine when he heard this. He’d severely underestimated House Banfield, but it was too late now to do anything but keep going.

“Crush Liam no matter what it takes. Cleo himself won’t be a problem, but if I don’t get rid of Liam now—and I mean right now—I could lose everything. If it isn’t already too late.”

Linus knew he was wrong. He knew that now that he’d failed to assassinate them, it was already over for him.

“Liam is in the palace right now to meet with Prince Cleo,” the assassin warned him. “If you go after him in the palace, there’ll be no escaping consequences.”

“I’m already in too deep, but things aren’t over yet. I can still pull myself out of this somehow as long as we take out Liam and Cleo now. You need to kill the two of them—kill Liam—no matter what it takes. I don’t care how you do it... just get it done.”

Linus had handled Liam the wrong way. Instead of being careful and sneaking up on Liam, he’d decided to go at him head-on to eliminate him quickly. He’d been too focused on Calvin to see that Liam was a bigger threat than he’d ever imagined, and hence this dire predicament.

“Are you sure?” the man in the mask asked Linus.

Linus hung his head and muttered, “Do it.”

The assassin sank into the floor, his voice seeming to fade away. “Yes, sir.”

When the man had disappeared, Linus’s expression went from despair to fatalistic. “If I accept failure and run away alive, all that awaits me is the life of a

loser. If that's all I can look forward to, then I'd rather..."

This desperate decision was Linus's final gamble.

In a vehicle that floated above the road, I was on my way from the hotel to the Imperial palace to assure myself of Prince Cleo's safety. There was a calm in the air that made it difficult to believe an assassination attempt had just occurred. Sure, it was nighttime, but the atmosphere just seemed *too* quiet. It felt unnatural to me, and I sensed bloodlust.

I said, "People will make any move, even if it's a bad one, if you drive them into a corner, won't they?"

In the vehicle with me were Claus and some other knights acting as my guards, but they hadn't seemed to pick up on the ominous feeling in the air.

"What is it, Lord Liam?"

"Stop the car."

The hover vehicle came to a stop and my guard stepped out. Kukuri, who was also present in secret, must have sensed what I had, because he showed himself along with some of his men.

I stepped out onto a pristine paved road. Streetlights, trees, and even flowerbeds flanked either side of the street, which would have fit about eight highway lanes in the world of my previous life.

All of my guards aside from Kukuri and his crew were rather bewildered as we stood out there by ourselves. All of them except for Chengsi, that is.

"We're not alone," she said, drawing her weapon.

A gunshot broke the silence of the night. I took half a step to the side and the bullet passed by me, embedding itself in the ground. Thanks to the physical strengthening I had undergone, I got away from the sniper's shot with nothing more than a slight ringing in my ears.

Claus swiftly drew his weapon and jumped in front of me. "Get back, Lord Liam!"

“Don’t worry about me—just protect yourselves.”

I pushed Claus aside and stood at the front of the pack, drawing my katana. Now multiple hidden snipers fired at me from different directions, but I cut the bullets down one by one with sweeps of my sword. I was rather pleased with myself for being able to emulate a master sword technique I’d heard about in my past life. Of course, my physical strengthening and the Way of the Flash sword style I’d mastered made this basically child’s play.

I glanced at Kukuri and his men and gave them an order “Take out those snipers.”

“Yes, sir.”

Several of Kukuri’s men vanished into the darkness. Soon enough, all the shooting stopped, but people began to appear from the shadows around us. They weren’t guards from the nearby palace who had heard the shooting, but people who clearly meant us harm. We were surrounded by knights, soldiers, and what I guessed were mercenaries. All of them were armed and hid their faces with coverings like ski masks.

My guards all pointed their swords at these newcomers.

“Who are you?” Claus demanded, but of course they didn’t answer.

“They’re my prey,” I told him. “Don’t get in my way, Claus.”

“Lord Liam?!”

I jerked my chin at the newcomers and provoked them. “What’s wrong—too afraid to make a move?”

I was sure there had to be some impressive fighters among them, and I wanted to see how tough Linus’s goons could be.

In response to my provocation, my enemy came at me wordlessly. The ones who looked like knights raised their swords, while the soldiers aimed their guns. Everyone aimed whatever weapon they carried my way.

“There we go,” I said.

I stood haughtily before my opponents as they came at me, just watching calmly without changing my stance. Then, in an eye blink, blood was spraying

the air in all directions as the first fighters to reach me were cut down.

Cries of surprise came from the knights who served as my guard.

“That was—”

“I didn’t even see him move!”

“So that’s the Way of the Flash?”

I was pleased by their awed remarks, but one voice was different. It was Chengsi, whom I’d appointed to my guard based on her appearance alone.

“So that was your rumored Flash, eh? Hee hee... It’s truly incredible.”

She sounded impressed, but something about her voice was heated too, as if I made her a little excited.

The enemies in front of me, particularly the mercenaries, were cowed by this display and now were hanging back. One of the knights shouted at his companions, “Don’t falter! We can win if we come at him all at—”

The head of the knight who’d shouted suddenly dropped from his body, which then collapsed with blood spurting from its neck. A fraction of a second later, the men nearest to him fell, one by one.

My remaining enemies surely took note of the big nasty grin on my face. I taunted them, “I don’t think you’re getting out of this one, guys.”

My attackers began to panic. Several turned to flee, but I pounced and took each one down. At this point, the only ones left were those paralyzed by shock. I couldn’t blame them, really. From an outsider’s perspective, it would have looked like I wasn’t lifting a finger while my enemies simply dropped like flies.

Claus looked on with his mouth hanging open. I gave him a warning. “You’re free to watch, but don’t let your guard down.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

The last ones left standing were the mercenaries, or maybe they were bounty hunters. Either way, they could do nothing but stare at me while trembling in fright.

“What’s wrong?” I asked the hired goons. “You guys want my head, don’t

you? You can't take my life if you don't use your weapons."

I took a step forward and the frightened mercenaries dropped their weapons, trying to make a run for it. I brought them down as I had the others who'd tried to flee.

"You've gotta be kidding me!" one of the fleeing mercenaries cried, looking back at his fallen companions. "They weren't in range of a sword! It doesn't even look like he's swinging it, so how—"

His whimpering was getting on my nerves, so I lopped his head off to end it. Just as he'd said though, there was a considerable distance between me and my enemies. With a normal sword, using a conventional sword style, they would have been out of range—but not if you used the Way of the Flash.

"True," I said to the head lying at my feet, "you weren't in the range of any old sword, but you were in *my* range...and sorry to say, the moment you fools pointed weapons at me, your lives were forfeit. Too bad for you."

Thinking to catch me off guard, a number of bounty hunters who had hung back in the shadows up until now suddenly leaped out in a frenzy, leveling their weapons at me. To anyone watching, it would seem as though I didn't strike them and simply returned my katana to its scabbard. However, with the sound of a click as my sword slid into place, my enemies all fell to the ground at once, adding to the grisly scene.

Claus was bewildered. "What just happened?"

"It's over, Claus. Let's go see Prince Cleo, but we'll switch to a different route. Send a message to palace security to warn them about this one."

Getting himself together, Claus put on his game face. He shook his head. "Is this route still dangerous?"

"I've got a bad feeling about it. Better to be cautious."

Before I could return to the car, Kukuri approached me.

"There's something I need to inform you of, Lord Liam."

With various attacks underway, Cleo had escaped the palace and went to a

facility that was used as a safehouse for emergencies. It was staffed by a garrison of guards. Here, he sat with Lysithea, his personal guard, catching his breath.

Lysithea sighed. "I'm glad Cecilia wasn't in the palace."

Cecilia wouldn't do well in a fight, so it was fortunate she was away for her marriage meeting.

Cleo glanced over at his staff, who had hastily fled the palace along with him. They had barely made it out alive, so they were all collapsed on the furnishings and even the floor, breathing heavily.

"I'm not seeing some of my people, Tia."

The armed Tia answered coldly, "They found reasons to stay elsewhere tonight, rather than in the palace. Perhaps they knew in advance that there'd be an attack."

"I see..." Cleo said, catching on. "But some of them have served me for quite a long time."

If these staffers had predicted the attack, that meant they were traitors. Still, Cleo didn't want to show his unease so as not to worry the rest of his staff. They were already rattled enough. He may have been a prince in name only, but he still had his pride, so he maintained a brave face.

Tia commended him for his attitude. "Your composure is impressive, Prince Cleo."

"No need for compliments. Have you contacted the count?"

"Yes. He was attacked on the road, but he dealt with it and he's still on his way. Another five minutes—"

In the middle of her sentence, Tia drew her rapier and dashed over to Cleo. She grabbed him and pulled him out of his chair, slinging him behind her. Before Cleo could figure out what was happening, he heard metal clashing against metal as Tia repelled a dagger that had been thrown at him. People covered in blood were pouring in through the doorway. It seemed the blood belonged to the security force of knights assigned to protect this facility.

Lysithea drew her own weapon. “They’ve infiltrated here, too?!”

She had good reason to be surprised, since this safehouse was supposed to be top secret.

One of the blood-splattered infiltrators, one with a distinctive face and narrow eyes, smiled at the baffled Cleo and Lysithea. His attitude seemed flippant, considering the gravity of the situation. “The goings-on of the court are mysterious indeed. Trust me, things of this nature happen all the time.”

“H-hey! I’ve seen you before!” Lysithea realized.

“Well, under normal circumstances I’m a knight stationed at the palace, so that doesn’t surprise me.”

Cleo struggled to understand how a man with the respected title of knight could participate in an attack like this.

Tia ordered her subordinates to protect Cleo and stepped before the man. She spoke with her usual calm demeanor. “Looks like your master Prince Linus is running out of options.”

The bloody men all chuckled.

Tia narrowed her eyes. “What’s so funny?”

The man with narrow eyes spread his arms and shrugged. “I just laughed because you’re so off the mark!”

“So it’s *not* Prince Linus you work for?” Tia asked, fishing for information.

The man scratched his cheek. “Looks like you don’t know much about what goes on in the palace either. I can’t exactly tell you who it is we work for, but I bet you’d be shocked to know.”

“If you don’t want to talk, that’s fine,” Tia said ominously. “I can take my time getting it out of you after I’ve captured you.”

“You’re a confident one, aren’t you? Go ahead.”

Two knights standing beside the narrow-eyed man raised their weapons and approached Tia. She guessed that everyone she was up against was a skilled knight—but Tia was even better.

“Just two?” Tia commented. “It won’t be that easy.”

With her rapier a blur, Tia cut down the two attacking knights. Their clash was over in an instant, and Cleo couldn’t even tell what had happened.

Is that what a fight between high-level knights looks like?

The narrow-eyed man clapped mockingly. By now, he must have realized the difference in their skill levels, but he was still playing it cool.

“Well done. It seems we won’t be able to defeat you. I guess Count Banfield has some exceptional underlings. It’s almost enough to make me want to recruit you right here.”

In a chilly voice, Tia replied, “Lord Liam is my only master. It disgusts me to even think of serving someone else.”

She stepped forward to silence the narrow-eyed man, but quickly leaped back instead. A second later, a sword crashed down on the spot where she’d just been. A huge man almost three meters tall had lunged forward and swung his sword.

Wielding an enormous blade almost as tall as himself, the giant was gleefully surprised by Tia’s reaction time. “Been a few years since someone’s avoided my first strike.”

Cleo recognized the man. “But you’re a Swordmaster! Why, Sir Gerut?”

The towering man with the huge sword resting across his shoulder was Gerut, a swordsman so skilled that those of his kind went by the title “Swordmaster.” A Swordmaster lived only for battle, showing no interest in gaining knighthood or nobility. And yet, here was one such mighty Swordmaster opposing them now.

When Cleo asked him why he was doing this, Gerut glanced over at the narrow-eyed man. He didn’t care to explain things himself, so he left it to the other man.

“The darkness of the Empire runs quite deep, you see,” said the knight. “It’s rather common to steal a glance at it, thinking you know enough, and later find you were only at the very entrance. A Swordmaster attacking you is just a hint

of that darkness.”

The number of Swordmasters who were in the Empire changed with the times, but currently, only four people held that title. A swordsman who had ascended to the very top of their art, regardless of style or formal training, stood before them now as an enemy. Even Tia was beginning to feel more cautious about the situation.

Gerut could tell she was becoming more tense. “You’re strong. It’d be a waste to kill someone with your skills. Come to our side.”

Tia scoffed the man’s invitation. “Lord Liam is my only master. I would never betray him.”

Gerut sighed, looking truly disappointed as Tia raised her rapier. “That’s too bad... I looked forward to killing you when you’d increased your sword skills a bit more!”

Gerut closed the distance between them in an instant and crossed blades with Tia. Metal clashed with a shrill screech, sending sparks flying faster than the eye could see. To a nonfighter like Cleo, the flurry of Gerut’s and Tia’s clashing blades was impossible to follow.

This is a fight between swordsmen of the highest caliber.

He couldn’t keep up with their movements, but before he knew it, Tia was crashing backward into a wall far from where she’d begun the duel.

The man with narrow eyes sang Gerut’s praises. “They don’t call you a Swordmaster for nothing! You really are the most powerful swordsman of our generation, aren’t you?”

Gerut just sneered at the flattery. “Spare me the sweet talk. Just clean up the rest of them, would you? I don’t get any satisfaction out of cutting up weaklings.”

The Swordmaster only wanted to fight strong opponents, so he turned to face Tia again, completely ignoring Cleo and Lysithea. As a knight, Lysithea was only of average strength, so she didn’t even register as an opponent to him.

The man with narrow eyes ran his hand through his hair. “Sure, we’ll take care

of the others. I don't want to waste too much time here, so let's get this over with quickly, all right? Come on, boys, get to work."

The narrow-eyed man turned and ordered his men to move, but they didn't react. Seeing his men standing there unmoving irritated him and he shouted, "What's wrong? Hurry and clean this place up!"

His men remained still, but a new voice answered him from the room's entrance.

"They're dead already, so I'm afraid they're not gonna be able to do that work for you."

"Who's there?"

When Cleo heard that voice, he exclaimed, "Count Banfield!"

Emerging from the darkness was a smiling Liam. "You guys seem like you're having fun. You got room for me?"

Liam passed through the narrow-eyed man's subordinates, ignoring them all, and they started falling to the ground with blood pouring out of their bodies.

Propped up against the wall where she'd been thrown, Tia looked to be in a fair amount of pain, but she still smiled when she saw Liam. "Lord...Li...am..."

Liam glanced at Tia, then looked up at the much taller Swordmaster. "I've always wanted to meet a Swordmaster. How about handing that title over to me?"

Liam challenged the Swordmaster like he was facing off against an opponent in a video game.

Chapter 7:

Swordmaster

AS LIAM FACED OFF against the Swordmaster Gerut, Lysithea couldn't believe what she was seeing.

How can he stand against a Swordmaster like this?

Even a trained swordsman like Lysithea could only tremble in fear at the aura of danger Gerut exuded with a sword in his hands. He was beyond first-rate—so skilled that he was almost inhuman—and yet Liam looked relaxed standing before him.

Liam drew his sword and spun it around with his fingers, smiling at Gerut. “While I was on my way here, I got a report from one of my people that you were spotted. Hearing I could fight a Swordmaster made me as excited as a giddy little kid.”

Liam might not've been a child anymore, but he was still young, so it was shocking to Lysithea that he spoke the way he did. *He said he was going to fight Gerut?* She was starting to doubt his sanity. *Does he not know how strong a Swordmaster is?*

Gerut easily outclassed even first-rate swordsmen. Lysithea assumed Liam was no match for him, but Gerut reacted in a way she hadn't expected. The giant grinned even more fiercely than Liam did, and the hilt of his sword creaked as he gripped it more tightly. He looked more excited than he had been to face Tia.

“So you're Liam.”

Gerut moved within sword distance of Liam. With their height difference, it looked like an adult facing a child.

Craning his head back to look up at Gerut, Liam said haughtily, “That's ‘Lord Liam’ to you. I'm a future duke, you know.”

He was so brazen that he seemed like a little kid who knew nothing about the

ways of the world. Lysithea shook her head. *No matter how strong he is, he doesn't stand a chance. Not even a group of master swordsmen could touch a Swordmaster—forget Count Banfield on his own.*

She was convinced even the fabled Way of the Flash would accomplish nothing against a Swordmaster. Tia was an incredible swordsman in her own right, and she'd lost to Gerut in seconds. Could Liam really beat someone like this? Lysithea was beside herself with worry.

Gerut raised his sword, which itself was taller than Liam. "Your sword style is called the Way of the Flash, I hear. Who's your master?"

Gerut was taking him seriously, but Liam just stood there casually, not even taking a fighting stance. "My master's name is Yasushi. He's the strongest swordsman in existence."

Gerut's face twisted. "Yasushi? Never heard of him."

Liam's expression changed. "Don't worry about it. You're going to die here, so you don't need to."

A second later, even more vivid sparks than before flew between them. Their movements were so fast that Lysithea saw only afterimages. Even the metallic clashing of their blades was more dramatic than when Tia had engaged Gerut.

The Swordmaster was probably holding back with her!

Their swooshing blades whipped up a wind around them. This no longer seemed like a battle between mere human beings.

Wh-what...? Lysithea couldn't believe that Liam wasn't losing any ground against Gerut. *Impossible! This man's skills have even been acknowledged by the Empire. How is Liam still standing?*

Cleo called out to Lysithea, interrupting her thoughts. "Lysithea, see to Tia's wounds!"

"R-right." Lysithea followed her brother's instructions, rushing over to the wall and squatting beside Tia. She was covered in wounds, but remained focused on Liam instead, spellbound by the sight of him. Lysithea noticed her rapturous expression.

How are you still blushing in a situation like this?

Tia couldn't look away from Liam. She said dreamily, "It hurts that I wasn't able to fulfill my duties, but I must burn the sight of Lord Liam's majesty into my eyes..."

Lysithea had thought of Tia as a diligent knight, so she was a little disillusioned by the sight of her acting smitten by Liam in such a serious situation. Still, Tia managed to take a small bottle from a pouch and brought it to her lips. Several times she drew in some of the fluid and then spat it onto her wounds. When the healing drug made contact with her skin, it disinfected the area at the same time it sealed her cuts. The potent drug worked quickly, and her wounds closed, but the healing process was painful.

Nevertheless, Tia's expression never changed. In fact, she pointed toward the battle to make sure Lysithea and Cleo were watching Liam, too. "Do you see how gallant Lord Liam is?"

"Is this really the time to be spectating?" Lysithea said. "If we don't do something about this, we're all going to die!"

Lysithea's outburst was only reasonable. The knights who had broken into this facility were formidable, and they'd brought Gerut with them too. There was a very slim chance their group would be getting out of this alive. Plus, it was strange that no help had come for them, even with all the commotion their attackers were causing.

And it's not just Linus. Am I right in thinking someone above Linus is involved? They want to get rid of Cleo that badly?

Lysithea couldn't imagine that Linus would be able to assemble these knights and recruit Gerut on his own, which meant someone more influential than Linus was involved. Calvin, then, or maybe even someone higher up than Calvin? With this realization, Lysithea had half given up on the hope of getting out of here at all.

Now that her wounds were healed, Tia picked up her weapon and stood up, but she still didn't move to help Liam.

"There's no need to panic," she explained. "Please just watch the strongest

fighter in existence do his thing.”

Having crossed blades with this Swordmaster, I came to a realization.

“This is all it takes to call yourself a Swordmaster?” I taunted him. “Well, I guess starting today, I’m a Swordmaster too!”

I grinned, and the Swordmaster gritted his teeth. More and more slashes were appearing on his arms and legs as we exchanged blows. I, on the other hand, remained unscathed.

Swordmaster Gerut had lost his composure. “You’re just a cocky brat who hasn’t even lived a hundred years yet!” He increased the speed of his movements, but I just sped up to match him.

“And you’re losing to that brat, so what does that make you? I think you should get rid of that title of yours—it doesn’t really suit you.”

“Enough!”

I parried a blow from the Swordmaster and swept his blade away from me. This caused his balance to falter for a moment, and in that space, I marked his chest with a slash.

“D-damn you!”

He knew I was just playing around, which just made him all the more furious. Man, the Way of the Flash was a truly incredible sword technique—undoubtedly the best in existence. It was too bad for everyone else that such an amazing technique had been passed down to a villain like me!

How long has it been since I’ve fought another talented swordsman? Was it back when I had a match with Kurt during our training days? I’d had my work cut out for me back then, trying to learn how to moderate my power. If the Way of the Flash had a weakness, it was that it was nearly impossible to hold back while using it. After all, it was a technique where you could kill your opponent simply by drawing your sword. It wasn’t suited for friendly sparring matches, so I never really got a chance to show off how strong I was when training. The only place I could make use of it was in a fight to the death.

I said to Gerut, "Guess you're good enough to tell that I'm just toying with you."

"You dare mock me?!"

I wished he'd realized that fact as soon as I faced him with my sword already drawn. In the Way of the Flash, you faced your opponent with your sword in its scabbard, so I'd been doing nothing *but* mock him from the moment we'd squared off. I wasn't taking him seriously in the slightest. If I were using my Way of the Flash seriously, the battle would have been over the instant I drew my sword from its scabbard. The reason I was actually exchanging blows with the Swordmaster was just to determine what he was capable of...and to see how strong I'd become.

The Swordmaster jumped back, putting distance between us. When he did that, the narrow-eyed man was surprised. "Lord Swordmaster, how long are you going to play with this boy?"

"Quiet!" Gerut barked at him. "I never thought someone could trade blows with me like this, so it's thrown me off a bit. You'll be great prey though, boy."

Like all Swordmasters, as I understood it, Gerut was the type who enjoyed fighting above all else. You saw knights like this sometimes; sad souls who were constantly chasing the thrill of battle. I understood striving for personal strength, but that addictive need was completely foreign to me.

The Swordmaster held his blade up beside his face, and I sensed a strange emanation of danger from him.

"I never thought I'd find another person to use this technique against," he said cryptically. "I hope you can endure it for a bit, so I can have a little fun."

Smiling, the Swordmaster came at me, but his attack was just terrible. He slashed over and over again in a single instant, almost forming a mesh of slashes, but they were all concentrated in a single area. It was a disappointing display.

"Just terrible."

The Swordmaster kept on smiling. "Oh, this special technique will bring me victory! See if you can escape the storm of slashes!"

He kept up his frenzied slashing. *Come on... Really?* I could have kicked myself for actually sensing danger from something like this, and my master would have certainly scolded me for it.

With one swing of my sword, I swept his flurry of slashes aside, and this caused the Swordmaster to stop. Rather than act surprised, though, he seemed excited.

“You can withstand even *that?*”

“You mean that disappointing trick? Do people actually believe you’re strong?”



I was starting to doubt the man's legitimacy. In the first place, was it even possible for someone who did dirty work like this to have earned the title Swordmaster? Maybe he wasn't a liar but had been lied to, and was given the title of Swordmaster to entice him into working for these people. What a letdown.

Whatever the case, maybe the title of Swordmaster was something I should take on, myself. The best way for the Way of the Flash to gain greater notoriety was for me to become a Swordmaster.

"I guess starting today, I can call myself a Swordmaster too!"

"Keep dreaming!" Gerut snarled.

The Swordmaster suddenly changed stances again. He stood in a loose position, holding his sword in one hand. Then he pursed his lips and drew in a long breath, and all the muscles of his body swelled as if he were inflating them.

"What do you think you're doing?" I didn't know what he had planned, but I held off from attacking him for a moment. I was curious to see what trick he had to play next.

Gerut then exhaled, and his bulging muscles suddenly sucked in again. As his muscles continued to contract, they actually became smaller than they had been before. He shrank so much that his clothes became baggy, hanging in his way, so he tore them off his body.

The Swordmaster stood before me in nothing but his underwear, looking somewhat ridiculous, but steam rose from his bare flesh, like a weird kind of aura you'd see in an anime or manga.

"Well, you look different," I said in an unimpressed tone.

"This is where it gets serious. You'll regret giving me the time to do that."

The Swordmaster was smiling, but looked like he was in pain too, as if the transformation had put a burden on his body.

"This is the absolute pinnacle of my sword training," he boasted. "The answer I arrived at after years of searching for pure power. It's a secret technique that chips away at my life in exchange for explosive physical abilities."

The Swordmaster took a step forward, and in the next instant his sword crashed down in the place where I had been standing. The blow left a crater in the floor, as if there'd been an explosion there.

I was wide-eyed with surprise after dodging the blow, and now the next strike was coming. His sword was sweeping from the side, hoping to bisect me at the torso. I dodged that strike too, but immediately his sword came at me from a new direction. Each swing had a speed and power completely unlike what he'd displayed before.

"What do you think about *that*, kid? Still think I'm weak? I could chop a mobile knight in two right now. This is what it means to surpass human limits!"

I deflected one of his blows with my own sword, and this time I was the one sent flying. While I was knocked off balance, the Swordmaster swung his blade down from over his head with both hands, putting all his strength behind it.

"This is it!"

I caught his blade with my own and the impact actually drove my feet into the floor. His blow probably did have enough strength to cut a mobile knight in half. But...it still left me uninspired.

"This is your pinnacle? Looks like you were searching for the wrong thing."

"What?"

I deflected each and every one of the Swordmaster's following blows, and the katana I'd brought with me became completely battered. I was glad I hadn't brought my favorite one, and I was also starting to regret not having finished this up sooner.

The Swordmaster was triumphant, misreading my regretful expression. "You can't even fight back now! How do you plan on seizing victory, eh? If you're waiting for me to tire myself out, then too bad for you. I can keep this up all day if I want to!"

With each attack the Swordmaster launched, his skin split open in places, spurting blood. His muscles and bones apparently were unable to keep up with his movements. Could he really keep this up all day? Now, that might finally impress me a bit.

“It’s too bad,” I told him. “I was hoping to learn something from you, but your technique’s too sloppy.”

He was simply relying on brute strength and it wasn’t attractive. I was watching to see if there was anything I could learn from all this, but there was nothing worth paying attention to. *His technique is of no use to me.*

“Show my sword some respect, boy!”

I lowered my sword, letting down my guard, and the Swordmaster took the opening. He brought his sword down at my skull...but it didn’t cut me at all. The man’s eyes went wide with shock as he stared at his sword and realized its blade had broken off at its base. The blade spun in the air and plunged to the floor, where it stuck in and vibrated. The blade’s metal glowed red with heat from being swung around so fiercely.

I pulled my feet out of the floor and slid my sword into its scabbard, saying to the Swordmaster, “Well, thanks for keeping it warm for me, but I’ll be taking the title of Swordmaster from you today. You can rest now.”

He simply gaped at me in shock. “No. It’s not...over... Not yet...”

Then, Gerut’s head fell from his body, and the rest of him soon followed, gushing blood. The bright-red spray covered the man with narrow eyes, who glared at me murderously.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him. “Not going to beg for your life?”

I stepped toward him, and he grabbed the hilt of his sword, but before he could free it, I severed both of his arms. The man with narrow eyes collapsed to his knees in agony, and yet he managed a bitter smile. He seemed really committed to acting tough to the end.

“The first time I heard about the Way of the Flash, I laughed, thinking it was some kind of street performance or something. Now, seeing it for real... I can still only laugh, because I still can’t believe it.”

The Way of the Flash’s secret technique was to cut someone down before they even knew the attack had begun, with sword strikes the human eye couldn’t register. It was too much for a common fighter to take in.

The man with narrow eyes hung his head and asked without looking at me, “Do you want to know who’s behind all this?”

I didn’t think I could trust a man like this to tell me the truth, so it seemed like there was no point in listening to what he had to say.

“No need.”

“Even if your enemy is the Empire itself?” The man raised his head, giving me a creepy grin.

“If that’s so, I say bring it on.”

The whole Empire was my enemy? So what? This fantasy world was just a playground for me to enjoy, and I sure enjoyed crushing my enemies.

Done listening to him, I severed the narrow-eyed man’s head from his body. He wasn’t laughing anymore.

The battle now finished, Lysithea ran over to me.

“Why did you kill him? We could have gotten information out of him!”

It was my policy not to do meaningless things. “I’d rather draw my own conclusions about who’s behind this. We should assume *everyone’s* an enemy.”

“I-I suppose so, but...”

“Do you really think he’d have told us the truth? He’d have just lied to mislead us.”

Aside from the standard garrison of guards stationed at the safehouse, security hadn’t come from the palace to protect Cleo. It was likely that Linus wasn’t the only one who wanted him dead. I couldn’t imagine Linus could get a Swordmaster to do his bidding, which meant it was Calvin or even the emperor himself who had it out for us. I actually felt better now that I was convinced they were out to eliminate us. The enemy you know is better than the one you don’t.

Tia ran over to kneel before me.

“I apologize for my shameful display earlier.”

Well, it was true Tia lost against the Swordmaster, but she managed to buy

some time before I could arrive. And now that I'd been the one to defeat Gerut in her place, after today I could call myself a Swordmaster.

"Swordmaster..." It did have a nice ring to it, and it was oh-so-fitting for a swordsman of the Way of the Flash.

"No, you did well enough—I commend you. I'm in a good mood today, anyway. After all, today I'm a Swordmaster now."

Tia genuflected formally. "Your generosity is greatly appreciated, my lord!"

Don't get carried away... I'm being generous just talking to you.

Tia looked up at me with her hands clasped together and eyes sparkling. I had to admit it felt good.

While I was grandstanding for Tia, Cleo, who'd been listening to us, cocked his head. "Are you not familiar with Swordmasters, Count?"

"Hm?"

Glancing at Gerut's corpse, Cleo went on. "His Majesty the Emperor is the only one who can appoint Swordmasters in the Empire. Of course, if someone were to recommend you to him, he might consider it, but you can't call yourself a Swordmaster just because you defeated one."

So there was no real merit in taking one of them down? "You're kidding..."

When she saw how speechless I was, Tia blushed and squirmed. "Oh, Lord Liam, you're fantastic, even when your plans fall through!"

Well, I guess I'm not a Swordmaster then. Knowing that Gerut was here was why I was so excited and got here so fast.

Having lost all motivation at the moment, I decided to call it a day.

"Whatever. Come on, let's get out of here."

Lysithea frantically tried to stop me. "You're leaving? Shouldn't protecting Cleo take priority?"

She doesn't understand anything. Why does she think I was playing around with that Swordmaster? Cleo was safe the moment I got here.

"The attackers have been wiped out, and now my people are protecting this

place. Plus, I sent a report to the authorities on my way here. Everything's taken care of, so the only thing left to do is head back and get some rest."

At times like this, it helped to have friends in high places that I could trust. Before I got here, I contacted the prime minister about the attack on the safehouse and had him take action.

"Everything's done...?"

After all, I couldn't have my fun with the Swordmaster until I took care of the boring stuff first. I was looking forward to toying with him, but the point of toying with someone was that you already knew you'd won. Playing around *before* you were assured of your victory was just being careless. In any case, one shouldn't play until the work is done...but for now both were finished, and it was time for some rest.

The last thing I needed to do was race here, so I charged in myself just so I could embarrass that Swordmaster. Save the humiliation for after you've already won! Wait, that sounds pretty wise. I should make it one of my sayings...

Chapter 8:

Responsibility

WHEN THE PRIME MINISTER was awoken in the middle of the night and Liam informed him of the assassination attempt on Cleo, he sighed with weary disgust.

“Prince Linus has been too careless.”

Linus had wanted to get rid of the small problem of Cleo before dealing with his more powerful foe, Calvin. That was likely as far as he’d thought about it, but because of his recklessness, things hadn’t exactly gone well for him. He’d screwed up the assassination, and now the tables would turn on him instead.

It wasn’t that Linus was stupid. He controlled his faction well. The prime minister hadn’t had a *terrible* impression of him up to now, but this impulsive move had sealed his fate. There was no coming back from this. Linus had no chance of becoming emperor at this point. In his mind, the prime minister scratched Linus off the list of those in the running for the throne and considered other candidates.

“Hm...but who recruited the Swordmaster?”

There were currently four Swordmasters acknowledged by the Empire, and someone had sent one of them to assassinate Cleo. All the prime minister could be certain of was that it hadn’t been him. There was the possibility that the Swordmaster had volunteered on his own, hoping to be rewarded for it, but the only reward Gerut cared about was increasing his personal strength, so the prime minister assumed someone had ordered him to get involved.

Now as the prime minister looked down at the final report on the incident at the safehouse, he smiled. “I didn’t think Liam was actually *that* strong.”

Liam had defeated a man the Empire had acknowledged as a Swordmaster, proving just how remarkably capable he was. It would be a good advertisement for Liam, and hence for Cleo’s faction as well.

The prime minister decided he should change his outfit. With one tap on his watch, his pajamas instantly converted into his work clothes. “Things are about to get very busy...”

The palace would be thrown into a frenzy; not so much by the assassination attempt on Cleo, but by the downfall of the second prince, Linus.

The night of the incident had passed, and by afternoon of the next day I was still stuck in the palace. They’d been investigating the attack on the safehouse since the night before, and that meant questioning me. So much for rest.

The meeting room they took me to was opulent, since I was a count and duke-to-be, so as they questioned me, I sat in a plush chair and sipped tea prepared by a maid.

I was surrounded not only by high-level officials, but by knights and soldiers who worked in the palace. They all watched me rather nervously. I just couldn’t relax with them looming over me like that.

“Hey, can I get some lunch yet?” I complained. “Since I came all the way here, I expect at least a full-course meal.”

In the first place, it was rude of them to give me nothing but a single maid to look after my needs while I was a guest. The staff assigned to me should have been in the dozens, and they should all have been beautiful women to boot. Had they forgotten I was a count?

One of the important bureaucrats evidently didn’t appreciate my attitude. “Count Banfield, do you understand exactly what it is that happened last night? I can’t believe you’re lounging around here like it’s your own home!”

“That’s rather rude of you,” I said. “I *am* concerned, believe it or not.”

A royal had almost been assassinated within the palace and then at a safehouse, it was true, but bloody family feuds like this were common here. Not to mention, the area they referred to simply as the “palace” was the size of a small country. Dark deeds had to be a daily occurrence within its walls.

“Something like this happens all the time, does it not?”

“I hope you’re not talking about the attempted assassination of a royal as if it’s a petty crime.”

Apparently, I was being a little too casual for the situation, at least according to these bureaucrats. I noticed, though, that the officials and military men they’d gathered for the investigation were of fairly low standing. It seemed to me that their top people should be handling this, so maybe *they* were the ones who should take things more seriously, and that was why I felt less than motivated to assist them. Personally, I was more worried about missing my lectures today than their investigation.

“Anyway, I have lectures in the afternoon I can’t miss, so can we get this over with already?”

The official who previously chided me was at wits’ end. “The reputation of the second prince is on the line here. Will you take this more seriously?”

“I know, that’s terrible. I’m really worried about that guy.”

“You’re shameless, you know that?”

“I’m telling the truth!”

I *was* worried about Prince Linus. I thought he was a pitiful man who picked a fight with the wrong person. I was glad he was so easy to provoke, though, as it would have been harder to handle him if he’d come at us in a more cunning and level-headed way. I expected the conflict with him to be more drawn out, but thanks to Linus himself, one of our rivals had already been eliminated.

This investigation might have been a serious situation for these officials, but from where I stood it was a done deal. Linus, the second prince, had turned out to be no match for me at all; not that I ever worried he would be, really. For me, he was like a pebble in my path that I kicked out of the way. Everyone’s found a little fun in giving a pebble a good kick.

“By the way,” I said, “question for you.”

“What might that be?” The officials all tensed up, wondering what was going to come out of my mouth next.

“Who do I put an application in with to become a Swordmaster?” That title

was honestly more important to me right now than their paperwork about Linus.

“Please do not joke right now, Count Banfield!” The officials all looked aghast at such a question, but I was being serious.

“Joke? I’m not joking, Listen, the best way for me to pay back my Master Yasushi for all he’s given me is by spreading word that the Way of the Flash is the most powerful sword style in existence. To do that, I want to be a Swordmaster.”

“What are you even talking about?”

I might be a bad guy, but I didn’t like leaving debts unpaid. Master Yasushi had done a lot for me, but I noticed that people kept treating the Way of the Flash like it was totally obscure. I felt it was on me to spread its name myself.

“You think I’m not good enough? Bring the other three Swordmasters here, then. If I can beat them, the Empire will have to acknowledge me as a Swordmaster, right?”

The officials all put their heads in their hands.

In another of the palace’s meeting rooms, Linus sat hanging his head. He’d just finished a strategy meeting with the nobles of his faction, but they’d all left. Alone, Linus smiled to himself weakly.

“What do you mean, ‘please don’t give up yet’? It’s all over for me.”

He’d known the nobles’ words were hollow, but he didn’t even have the energy anymore to be angry with them. Linus wasn’t stupid; he knew there was no coming back from this.

“I misjudged Cleo. No... I underestimated Liam. That man is the reason for my loss, I’m sure of it.”

He’d thought Liam was just a boy from the Empire’s outskirts, putting on airs. That had been a mistake. He should have either gone after Liam right from the start and crushed him with all the force he could muster, or done whatever it took to recruit him to his side. If he’d known this was the fate that awaited him

—if he'd been properly aware of Liam's true power—then Linus would have groveled before him if that was what it took to get Liam to join him.

Linus knew such hypotheticals were pointless now, but Linus couldn't help wondering exactly where everything went wrong. This chain of thought brought back the conversation he had with the prime minister when he warned Linus about going against Liam.

"The prime minister was right... Of course he was. He's been running the Empire from the shadows for years, so he knows what he's talking about," he muttered to himself.

A man slowly emerged from the floor, but he wasn't kneeling in respect. Rather, he was standing and he held a bottle containing an alcoholic drink. This masked man was leading the underground organization as the replacement of the man with the red mask.

Linus smiled fatalistically. "So you'll be the one to kill me."

"Your usefulness has run out, Prince Linus. I assure you that our new employer is saddened by this turn of events. He instructed me to handle the matter quickly." The man then held out the bottle.

Leaning back into the couch where he sat, Linus eyed the bottle's label and smiled. "This is one of my favorites. Thoughtful of you."

The man in the mask was a little surprised to find Linus acting so much more composed than he normally did. "I thought you would be more upset."

Now that Linus had dropped out of the succession conflict, he had nothing more to get worked up about. "I've completely embarrassed myself. I'm sure to go down in Imperial history as a total fool, so I figure I might as well go out with some dignity. Hold on; let me get a glass."

Linus stood and put a hand to the wall, causing a shelf to slide out bearing a selection of glassware and drinks. There were several drinking snacks available as well, and Linus selected one of them.

"This will go well with that drink."

The masked man opened the bottle for Linus.

Linus was chagrined. “So you’re to be my final drinking partner. I sometimes thought about the possibility of this day, but I would’ve preferred that my drinking partner be your boss, the one with the red mask. I knew him for quite a while... I mean, as much as one could know him.”

“It’s too bad about the chief. I apologize for his absence.”

Linus accepted the man’s apology. “If you guys couldn’t defeat Liam, then what chance would I have now? He really surprised me, though. I never would’ve thought he’d have stronger guys working for him than you all.”

Linus smiled oddly, as though unburdened after his loss. The man in the mask wore a bittersweet smile himself. “If I have the opportunity, Your Highness, I’ll get revenge for you.”

“You wouldn’t be paid for it.”

“That would be fine. Consider it a courtesy.”

“Well, since you put it like that...”

The masked man poured alcohol into the second prince’s glass. Linus downed it in one swallow and then held out his glass for more, reaching for his side snack as he did so.

“Tell me two things before I go. From your perspective, who’s fit to sit on the throne? Calvin? Cleo?”

The masked man chuckled. “From the dignified way you’re acting now, perhaps *you* were fit for the throne.”

That made Linus enjoy his drink. “I’ll take the compliment. Tell me this, though... Who was moving behind the scenes during all this? Who pulled in that Swordmaster?”

The masked man wouldn’t answer Linus’s second question. “We are sworn to never reveal the identity of our client.”

“I guess you’re right...”

Linus smiled comfortably, closed his eyes, and drew his last breath as if he were merely falling asleep.

The masked man stood watching him a while longer and spoke with some regret. “Yes, maybe things would have turned out differently if you’d shown this side of yourself sooner.”

The matter of the foolish prince’s assassination attempt was settled when he confessed to all his crimes and took his own life.

A week after the assassination attempt, I met with Prince Cleo in the palace, which was still in a bit of an uproar.

“You don’t look well, Your Highness.”

“What do you expect after a thing like that?”

Cleo wasn’t moping, exactly, but he didn’t look very lively either. *Is he gonna be okay like this? Geez, I guess a good person can be saddened even by the death of the person who tried to kill them. That’s no good. Why can’t he just think of it as defeating his enemy and be done with it?*

“I don’t have many memories with Linus,” Prince Cleo said. “But...I heard some things from the servants who acted as spies for him.”

“What’d they say?”

“That he looked down on me, but he also pitied me. They believe if I hadn’t joined the competition to be emperor, he never would have tried to remove me.”

How tender-hearted of Cleo, but being tender-hearted gets one nowhere. I was horribly betrayed in my past life as well, and I even tried to find ways to blame myself for it too. I endured awful treatment, but those responsible were never punished for it. I ended up dying alone in agony.

“Prince Linus was the one who tried to kill you, so there’s no need for you to torment yourself over his death. Not to mention, if we’re not careful, you could soon join him. If you don’t want that to happen, we have to stay tough and fight.”

Prince Cleo gave me an envious look. “You’re very strong, Count. You probably don’t understand how it feels to be weak.”

His words were biting, because I *did* understand how it felt to be weak, all too well. I was disgusted remembering how I had let bad people trample all over me in my past life. It was the very reason why I had determined to become a villain in my reincarnated existence.

“I understand what it feels like to be weak better than anyone,” I said. “If you’re weak but have the ability to become strong, then you have to do it. You seem to view weakness as a virtue, Your Highness...but bowing to weakness is a sin.”

Prince Cleo looked at me and narrowed his eyes. “What do you know? You were *born* strong.”

“I can’t get into it, but I assure you I know more about it than you.”

At that point, Tia entered the room. “Let me get you two some fresh tea. And Lord Liam, Mr. Brian has something he wishes to discuss with you.”

So I should take a break, I guess.

I stood up with a sigh. “Who does he think he is, summoning me away from the prince? If it weren’t Brian, I’d have him beheaded.”

I left the room.

After his conversation with Liam was cut short, Cleo gave Tia a rueful look. He was awfully fond of her now that she’d saved his life.

“I was rude to question the count about his personal experiences. I’ll apologize to him later.”

Tia’s respect for Liam was immeasurable, so Cleo thought she’d be angry with him. Instead, she giggled.

“Did I say something funny?” he asked.

Tia glanced at the door Liam had just left through. “How much do you know about House Banfield, Your Highness?”

“Well, I’ve heard that beginning at a young age, Lord Liam improved the poor economic conditions in his territory. I believe it was after taking possession of

an asteroid that contained large amounts of rare metals. Sounds like a lucky break to me.”

That was how so many viewed Liam. Everyone knew of Liam’s power and military strength, but they believed his domain thrived only because of the rare metals he’d stumbled upon.

Tia said, “I’m not acquainted with the intimate details myself, but Lord Liam came into his current position of count at the age of five.”

Peerage and territory had been thrust upon a child of only five years, but such stories were common in the Empire.

“I’d heard that some nobles force their domains onto their children, to wash their hands of them. I suppose that really happens, then...” Being a sheltered royal, Cleo didn’t know a lot about the world, so he was surprised to find that something he only heard rumors about was true. He never had many opportunities to interact with other nobles until recently. A lot of the nobles who formed his faction came across as tough on the outside but on the whole, were upstanding individuals. He couldn’t imagine that any of them would do something like force the governing of their territory onto an innocent child.

“The situation at the time was pretty bleak for House Banfield,” Tia went on. “The previous rulers worked their subjects to the bone and squeezed as much tax revenue from them as they could. That still wasn’t enough for the rulers to live lavishly, so they went into heavy debt as well. I was shocked when I heard it all. I didn’t know nobles could be so vile.”

Cleo agreed. “It does sound terrible, just like other stories I’ve heard about rulers exploiting their poor subjects. They were only ever stories to me, but it would seem they’re true.”

“Of course they’re true. The common people still suffer on many Imperial planets.” Tia grieved for what she imagined Liam’s childhood had been like. “What could the noble Lord Liam have thought when he saw his domain at the time? He piously endured in his role as count for decades with no thought to his own suffering. Oh, I’m sure Lord Liam was such an adorable young boy.”

Cleo thought the conversation was shifting a bit, but he nodded along anyway. “I’m, ah, sure he was.”

Encouraged by Cleo's agreement, Tia grew only more impassioned. "Yes! He was even more cute than he is now, and diligent, and precious! Overcoming countless obstacles, Lord Liam strove to develop his domain. He also trained hard enough to become a master swordsman, so he could be strong for the sake of his subjects!"

Liam *had to* become strong. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have been able to protect his subjects. Hearing all that, Cleo reflected on what Liam had said earlier.

"So he did it all for his subjects..."

I suppose I didn't truly know anything about Liam before. And I acted like I knew it all...

Tia was now out of control in her adoration.

"Aaah, if only I had been there to support Lord Liam at the time! I've watched footage of him again and again, but I'm sure Lord Liam was even *more* adorable in person! Just imagining Lord Liam exhibiting his skills as a ruler in the early days... Oh no, I think I'm drooling!"

The female knight wiped her mouth as she imagined a young Liam.

Cleo averted his eyes, thinking it kinder not to look. *A lot of strange people work for the count.*

Tia was talented indeed, but she suffered from some unfortunate qualities.

Snapping out of her fantasies, Tia continued, "Anyway, what I wanted to say was that the mighty Lord Liam was once weak, Your Highness—probably even weaker than you can imagine. Despite that, he lifted himself up, along with everyone else with him."

Cleo hung his head. "I see. I shouldn't have said what I did to him."

He's had it a lot harder than I thought. I hope I didn't hurt him with my careless comments.

Cleo reflected on what he'd said, determined to apologize to Liam at the first opportunity.

In the communications room, I had joined Brian's call, but I was having to listen to his usual fretting.

"What do you mean you toyed with a Swordmaster?"

Brian was aware that I fought a Swordmaster from having read a report of the assassination incident...and knowing me, he'd been able to deduce from that report that I went out of my way to duel with Gerut, even though I didn't need to let it go that far.

"I told you, I challenged him knowing from the start I'd win. There's no reason for you to get upset about it."

"But when I heard about the Swordmaster, I thought my heart had stopped!"

"I could restart it for you if it stopped, so calm down. I've got elixirs, you know." I grinned, and Brian's face turned red with anger.

"This is no laughing matter! You are too reckless, Master Liam! Look at all that chaos you were involved in at the mobile knight exhibition!"

"I put a stop to that chaos."

"Why can't you simply take it easy? Oh, on that subject..."

As I humored Brian, the subject turned from the commotion at the exhibition event to the Vanadís that I'd purchased.

"You purchased a mobile knight from the Sixth Weapons Factory?"

"Yeah, a stupidly expensive one-off. It's pretty nice."

"And you purchased all the add-ons for it, as well?"

"Yep."

Mason had convinced me to get the full package, so the Vanadís was under the care of the Sixth Weapons Factory for the time being. I couldn't use it as my backup craft with it looking the way it currently did, so I was having them add armor to it. There was also the full set of accessories, and a selection of spare parts to have on hand for maintenance.

"The Sixth Weapons Factory inquired about when they should deliver the items."

“I’m sure I won’t get a chance to use it anytime soon, so it can just go there to my domain.”

“Master Liam, was it really just a mobile knight you purchased?”

“Of course it was.”

I had no idea why Brian had asked me that, but now he was holding up some documents from the Sixth Weapons Factory to show me. Listed on them was the mobile knight and the various optional additions.

“Why are you showing me this?”

“Please look at the last listed item. It seems a battleship comes with the mobile knight as one of the optional additions.”

“Huh?”

Just as he said, I saw a ship *was* listed on the papers. It was a battleship specifically outfitted to house the Vanadís, built by the Sixth Weapons Factory with an emphasis on looks and performance.

“I let Amagi know and she said she had no knowledge of this, so I was curious what was going on. Were you not aware of any of this, Master Liam?”

I was breaking out in a sweat, more nervous than I’d been when facing off against the Swordmaster.

“I-I only told Amagi that I bought a mobile knight.”

To escape her criticism, I’d given Amagi only the most basic explanation, and she’d been accepting enough when she’d heard I’d bought a mobile knight. If she knew I *also* bought a battleship without consulting her, she’d absolutely be angry.

Maid robots were completely obedient to their masters. Therefore, you might think that meant they wouldn’t scold their masters, but you’d be wrong. Amagi could absolutely get angry at me in that dispassionate way of hers, or simply give me scathing looks when she was disappointed in me about something. It was scarier to me than any Swordmaster.

“I-I’m gonna go apologize to her.”

“I believe that would be prudent. But on a sunnier note, I heard that you finally took interest in a woman on the Capital Planet, Master Liam! Tell me, who was she? Which family does she belong to?”

When Brian brought up Lillie, I immediately cut the call. I didn't want to talk about that, but more importantly, right now I had to deal with Amagi.

“She's gonna be pissed at me. What do I do?”

I thought I was only buying a mobile knight, not knowing a battleship came with it as a set. Selling a ship as a so-called add-on... The Sixth were either really weird, or really good salesmen.

Chapter 9:

Three Swords

“LINUS WAS NO MATCH for me,” I was saying. “Why be surprised?”

I sat drinking at the hotel bar with a speechless Wallace beside me. Lately, he was drunk all the time, but he seemed to have finally sobered up while listening to the whole story of what had happened with Linus.

“It’s just hard to take in, you beating Linus like you did!”

Having failed to assassinate Cleo, Linus was now seen as a fool who had jumped the gun, and yet somehow, Wallace still seemed to admire his dead brother.

“Linus started his own faction and got to the position of second in line for the throne on his own ability. I just can’t believe the way things ended for him...”

I casually tipped my glass back. “He picked a fight with the wrong guy, just like I always said.”

“Well, sure, you did say that, but who would have guessed you’d actually win?”

“I was always gonna win. You think I’d start something I couldn’t finish?”

“But he was second in line for the throne!”

It sounded like Wallace had always expected me to lose, hence his manic nervousness. I really only joined the fight because I knew I would win. It was true that Linus had been a formidable foe with access to more power than me, but he had misused his resources.

The problem was that Linus’s main focus had been Calvin. He couldn’t open himself to any vulnerability where Calvin was concerned, so he hadn’t been able to go all-out against me. I simply took advantage of that. In effect, it was as if I’d stabbed Linus in the back while he was facing off against Calvin. It was an easy fight for me to win. After all, fighting fair and square wasn’t the way an evil lord did things. An evil lord always made sure his enemy couldn’t use everything

they had.

Speaking of the way an evil lord did things, it served my purpose well that because of Linus's defeat, Cleo's reputation was now skyrocketing. Before I got too comfortable, though, I had to consider my next target.

"Next up is Calvin," I said to Wallace. "That guy's gonna be more trouble."

Wallace felt the same way. "He *is* the crown prince. A lot of powerful nobles are on his side—most of the people in the palace back him! It's surprising enough you managed to beat Linus, but what's your plan for Calvin?"

"I have no particular strategy."

"You *don't*?"

Calvin was the crown prince, and as such, his position was rock-solid. For that reason, he didn't have any need to make desperate moves like Linus had. In other words, he had no weaknesses I was aware of that I could take advantage of.

Wallace held his head in his hands. "What do we do? Calvin's the tougher opponent!"

"Don't worry about it. It'll just be a longer fight, but I'll still win in the end."

Losing wasn't a possibility; not with the Guide on my side. All I needed to do was take pleasure in my conquests, and once Cleo was on the throne, I could do whatever I wanted.

Whoops, I almost forgot something important.

"By the way, Wallace, how's that mixer coming?"

Wallace glanced at me quickly and then downed his drink without saying a word.

"Hey," I growled, "right now that's the more pressing issue for me!"

Dammit! I wanted to use my time as a college student to play around, but I ended up spending so much time on this succession conflict that I still hadn't managed to have any fun yet. As a noble *and* as a college student, I was supposed to be living it up!

Wallace fixed me with a scornful look. “What do you want a mixer for, anyway? You’ve already got a girl, don’t you, Liam?”

“Rosetta? She doesn’t count. That’s not what I want.”

“No, the girl with the blue hair.”

“...How do you know about Lillie?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, and Wallace became flustered. For a second, I wondered if Kukuri or one of his men had leaked information about me, but that wasn’t possible with them.

Wallace explained, “A lot of people related to House Banfield are around here, you know. If you’re seen with someone, rumors are gonna spread.”

“I see.”

It made sense that someone or other had spotted us together.

“So who is she, anyway?” Wallace asked. “She must have been cute as hell for *you* to pick her up, Liam.”

“I’m not telling you.”

“Why not? Don’t keep it to yourself, you jerk!”

The Capital Planet was in a frenzy, and its people chattered with gossip.

“Did you hear? Prince Linus died of a sudden illness. The spot for second in line to the throne is open now!”

“What? I heard he took his own life! Anyway, wouldn’t that make the third prince the new second in line?”

“I don’t know—I heard the spot’s empty. I mean, the third prince can’t really hack it, can he?”

With the second prince having passed away, everyone assumed that meant the palace would scramble to fill the hole in the line of succession he left. In fact, princes fourth in line and even below that *were* maneuvering to take Cleo’s place as second in line. It was predicted that many princes and princesses were about to disappear as a result of Linus’s passing, just as had happened countless

times in the past.

But there was one other topic that the people of the Capital Planet—and of the Empire as a whole—were all abuzz about...

On a planet far from the Capital Planet, Yasushi sat gripping a digital newspaper between his hands. The disposable single page jammed with digital information was sold dirt cheap. For that reason, it was advertisement-heavy, but it was perfect for killing time.

The digital paper Yasushi held was currently playing a video of Liam holding a press conference. Watching it, Yasushi trembled with rage.

“Th-that little bastaaard! He did it! He finally, really did it!”

Yasushi was crying, and not with happiness, but from frustration and terror.

In the video, Liam was surrounded by reporters after having thwarted the assassination of Prince Cleo. It had gotten out that there had been a Swordmaster involved in the attempt, and reporters had demanded an interview with Liam to hear about it.

The press conference was being held in the lounge of some fancy hotel, and Liam sat on a couch answering questions with a scowl on his face.

“The Swordmaster? Yeah, I’m a master of the Way of the Flash, so I beat him.”

The reporters were incredulous about Liam’s claim that he’d bested the Swordmaster.

“You defeated one of the big four? Really?”

The Swordmasters were the greatest swordsmen in the Empire, so it was unbelievable that Liam could have defeated one of them. Yasushi didn’t want to believe it either.

In the video, Liam looked annoyed. *“Don’t make me repeat myself. I said I cut him down... But apparently, I can’t call myself a Swordmaster just for beating one of them. Don’t you think that system’s a little messed up? I’ve asked the palace to grant me the title, but they don’t seem to want to.”*

As for what Yasushi had to say about that...

“What the heck is he saying?” Yasushi blurted out loud. “C-could he really be strong enough to beat a Swordmaster now? That kid’s a monster!”

Yasushi was something of a swordsman himself, though not nearly as great as he had led Liam to believe, so he had at least a loose understanding of what it took to be a Swordmaster.

The reporters continued to be shocked by Liam’s attitude. *“Y-you would call yourself a Swordmaster? Normally His Majesty the Emperor only considers recommendations after candidates pass many examinations—”*

“Are you an idiot? The swordsman who passed all those tests lost his duel with me, so those tests don’t prove anything. I’m the strongest... I’m a Swordmaster. If you won’t acknowledge my skills, bring the other three here right now! I’ll cut them all down in front of you!”

A buzz went through the gathered reporters.

Oddly, Liam suddenly seemed to think better of what he’d just said. *“No, I said too much just then.”*

When Liam abruptly started walking back his statement, the reporters seemed to interpret his shift in attitude as an admission that he couldn’t actually beat the other three Swordmasters. However, Liam had another correction to make.

“I’m not the strongest. My master is.”

All the blood drained from Yasushi’s face.

The reporters asked Liam about this mysterious master. *“Your master... meaning your teacher in the Way of the Flash? Why is your teacher so unknown then? If your sword technique is so unsurpassed, shouldn’t he be more—”*

“Don’t you dare insult Master Yasushi!”

Using his tablet, Liam projected a video recording, making the hologram large for all at the press conference to see. In the video, taken back when Yasushi had been training Liam, Yasushi posed with a sharp look on his face.

“You idiooooooot!”



Yasushi wanted to stop Liam from going on, but the video he watched was already a thing of the past. There was no changing things now.

In the news recording, Liam praised Yasushi, his eyes sparkling earnestly. *“Yasushi’s the strongest fighter in the universe—the ultimate swordsman whose level I hope to attain. Unfortunately, I still can’t even imagine myself ever surpassing him. I’d be a lot more scared to face him in a duel than some Swordmaster.”*

The reporters were stunned to hear this. *“He’s that strong?”*

“Yes... Stronger than someone who’s beaten a Swordmaster.”

The reporters started gushing, as if trying to dream up headlines for a news story.

“Yasushi—the Strongest Swordsman in the Universe! No... The Sword God Who Surpasses all Swordmasters!”

“Yes... Sword God!”

“Strongest in the universe!”

“Yasushi the Sword God... But who is this guy?”

Sure enough, below the news video was an accompanying article that proclaimed: “The strongest fighter in the universe is a Sword God named Yasushi!”

This news had even made it to this planet far, far away from the Capital Planet. Yasushi was so terrified that he couldn’t stop trembling. *No no no no no no! If I stay here, I’ll be killed! I have to get away... I have to flee the Empire!*

Liam’s goodwill had driven Yasushi into a corner. Cowering in the dimly lit shack where he lived, he thought frantically about what to do next.

Suddenly, there was a commotion outside his door.

“Hey, get Yasushi out here! The strongest fighter in the universe is in there, isn’t he?”

It was a rough man’s voice; probably someone who had heard Yasushi’s name on the news and hoped to challenge him to become the new strongest fighter

in the universe. Yasushi could tell from the man's voice that he had confidence in his skills.

"Eeeeeek!!!"

As Yasushi tried to escape through a rear window, he heard the voices of his two live-in students arguing with the man at the door.

"Huh? What makes a small fry like you think you can challenge our master?"

"Better turn away while you still can!"

The challenger retorted, *"You brats dare make fun of the originator of the Way of the Ultimate Infinity? I've cut down five famous knights already!"*

To Yasushi, the man sounded more than dangerous enough. Doubting that his young students could beat such a person, he put one leg up on the windowsill, but he paused when he heard a loud *whack!* It was a sound like a wooden sword striking a body, but it was too loud. An agonized scream came from the man who'd come to challenge Yasushi.

"Gyaaaaa! My arm! My aaaaarm!"

Yasushi heard his students laughing.

"Don't make so much noise—you'll bother the neighbors. The old lady who lives next door is always getting on our case."

"How 'bout we crush your right leg next?"

Again, there was the sound of flesh being struck, and the man's wails became shriller. As Yasushi trembled in terror, the people who accompanied the challenger spoke up.

"S-stop, please!"

"We'll leave! We'll never come here again!"

"P-please! Just let us go!"

The man's companions were trying to stop Yasushi's students, but they weren't backing down and were too strong to be driven back.

The cruder of the two students apparently hadn't been able to resist taking on the challenger, having heard him claim he was strong. However, the student

was irritated at how easily he knocked the man down.

“You say you beat five famous knights? You’re weak—so weak I’m yawning.”

“What? You really believed their lies?” laughed the other student. Yasushi considered that one too be the sadistic one. “Are you stupid?”

The laughter of the sadistic student who enjoyed tormenting people was punctuated by another crunch of flesh under wood. As he listened to this, Yasushi was literally pouring with sweat.

Angered by the sadistic student’s mockery, the crude student said, *“I’ll kill you first.”*

“Oh yeah? Did you forget that we need Master’s permission to kill a student of the same school? I’ll tell Master you said that!”

“Y-you jerk!”

Yasushi had told them that students of the same school were forbidden from killing one another. This was insurance Yasushi had come up with to prevent Liam from challenging him to a fight. He had made sure to instill that into his two new students as well because they were already far stronger than he was. Yasushi couldn’t even beat a couple of children.

After hearing the people outside run away while carrying their beaten friend, Yasushi finally clambered down from the window and went to the door. The entryway was in a terrible state, but he composed his expression so as to not give away his fear. After all, he had to maintain his dignity in front of his two students, lest they doubt his mastery over them.

What vicious brats. But at this rate, they’ll be able to take down Liam. Thank goodness they got rid of the idiots that came after me, but I really need to get out of the Empire before more show up.

Yasushi looked down at the two blood-covered children and put on an act of exasperation. He sighed. “You two are still getting up to things like this?”

The two kids quickly corrected their posture in front of Yasushi. So different now from when they’d confronted the men outside, they looked like mere children receiving a scolding.

“B-but, Master—!”

“I didn’t want to!”

You most certainly did want to! Yasushi screamed internally. *You creatures terrify me!*

All this time that he’d been looking after the two of them, Yasushi had just barely managed to hide his nervousness. Thankfully, they continued to call him “Master” and respect him, somehow.

“You two—clean this up, take a shower, and then meet me in the back room.”

When the two students had cleaned up as ordered and came to the back room, Yasushi handed them the tools they would need to kill Liam. Two swords for the crude child, and a single longer-than-normal blade for the child with the sadistic personality. All three were good swords, fittingly purchased by Yasushi with the allowance Liam had given him.

The students’ eyes sparkled as they accepted the blades.

“Whoa! Can we really have these, Master?”

“A sword just for me!”

He’d also prepared clothes for the two, and everything else they would need to go on a journey.

A journey to kill Liam.

With two of them, at least one’s gotta succeed, right? Once they leave here, I can flee the Empire alone.

Yasushi gave them a solemn look. “At this time, I grant the two of you full mastery.”

The feral children exchanged a look.

“Huh? But why, Master? Our training isn’t over!”

“Yeah, Master! There are still so many things we want to learn from you!”

Yasushi smiled, but on the inside, he was losing his mind with worry. *Well, I have nothing left to teach you! Liam was like this too, but these two are plain crazy! How are they actually managing to accomplish everything I give them to*

do for their training?

Just like Liam, the two kids had undergone all sorts of training that would be impossible for a normal person. There was nothing Yasushi could dream up to teach them anymore, and if he kept them around, he'd eventually screw up at some point and they would catch on. He wanted them away from him as soon as possible.

"Go forth into the outside world and hone your blades," he said importantly. "You must find your own Way of the Flash out there."

The two of them looked like they were about to cry at their master's unexpected proclamation, and they clutched their new swords to their bodies. Their weird reactions just made them all the scarier to Yasushi.

Why are you crying and hugging swords? That's terrifying!

"I want you to travel and continue to perfect your skills. I'm sure you'll risk your life in battle at times, but I want you to remember this: You will learn the most from your senior pupil."

The crude child wiped away tears. "Our senior pupil... Liam? He mastered the Way of the Flash too, didn't he?"

"That's right, and you're no match for him just yet, so I want you to polish your skills out in the real world. Then, when you're ready, you can challenge him."

The child with the sadistic personality sniffled. "Is he really that strong? *We're* strong."

Yasushi nodded to himself. *Frankly, I have no idea how to tell who's stronger. You're all three monsters to me, and you monsters should just kill each other.*

He feared they'd be suspicious if he beat around the bush, so Yasushi declared, "He's so strong that you'll have to come at your senior pupil with the intent to kill him. Any less effort than that and *you'll* be the ones losing your lives. Also, you two must come at him together, because of how much greater his skill level is."

There's a good chance that if they attack Liam together, they'll be able to kill

him.

The two youths nodded, crying again. Yasushi handed them their bags, telling them that their preparations to leave were complete. He'd prepared high-quality clothing for both of them using the funds remaining after purchasing the swords, and he'd put finishing touches on the clothing himself. Yasushi was clever with his hands, so the clothes looked even more impressive after just a little tailoring. Yasushi felt he owed the two of them at least something for what they'd be doing for him, so the nice clothing was a way to show his appreciation. He'd also set aside a few million for them in digital currency as well, so they'd be able to travel for a while without worrying about money.

"Once you leave, I will leave this place as well."

His students were visibly shaken by the prospect of their home being abandoned.

"Master?"

"Wh-why? This is our home!"

Yasushi came up with some platitudes to reassure them. "So that you know there is no way back, only forward. I will set out on a journey of my own, to continue to hone my own Way of the Flash. We may never meet again, but know that I'll always be praying for your safety."

After they beat Liam, then I can call them back and keep them around to protect me. No, that won't work—I can't trust these monsters around me forever. I'd never be able to relax. Not to mention, if they succeed in killing Liam, these two will be in more than a little trouble with the law.

Yasushi offered the crying children some kind words to soothe their sadness. When they had changed into their new outfits and fixed their swords to their waists, he stood before them.

"You two have really grown," he said, and they looked bashful.

They thanked him after resolving to set out on their journey.

The crude one said, "Thank you for everything, Master. I'll come back to see you after beating our senior pupil and making something of myself!"

“I’ll prove that *I’m* your best student, Master,” said the sadistic one. “I’ll put up with this long journey, because it’s part of our training too.”

Once the two of them had set off and Yasushi could no longer see them, he heaved a great sigh of relief.

Whew—they’re finally gone. I’ve spent decades raising those two, but I’m finally free.

Now that they were gone, Yasushi looked around his quiet home. It was practically empty of anything but training equipment.

I guess I’ll miss them a little. He admitted to himself that he had come to care for them a bit while raising them.

“Hmph! What am I thinking? I can finally rest easy now that they’re gone. Now I’m *free*.”

Never thought a guy like me would end up raising kids. Well, I guess I feel a little bad for them, having me as a parent.

Yasushi was preparing for his escape from the Empire when the woman who lived next door barged into his house.

“Mr. Yasushi, those kids of yours were making a racket again!”

“H-hey, neighbor! S-so sorry about that.”

“I don’t know what this sword school of yours is about, but is there any point in working so hard at something that won’t help support you in the future? Not to mention that you don’t look like you’re all that strong yourself.”

Yasushi smiled wryly at the woman’s sharp words. “Ah ha ha... I’m ashamed to say you’re right.”

Dammit! You think I don’t know that? I don’t want anything to do with swordsmanship anymore either! Now I can finally stop living in fear of Liam. I’m a little afraid of leaving the Empire, but I should have done this a long time ago.

Refreshed—if a little lonely—Yasushi was ready to leave for a region where no one would know him. He was a little worried about his apprentices now that they’d left the nest, but he tried not to let that bother him too much.

I returned to my home planet after so long a stretch on the Capital Planet, and it felt like good timing after successfully defeating Linus. I wanted to show some appreciation to the people who worked for me and had looked out my domain in my absence too, so I even held a ceremony to confer honors onto some of them. Giving thanks was free, so it felt prudent to show appreciation where it was due to keep my people doing their best. Well, I guess since I was giving out rewards, it wasn't *completely* free.

At the appreciation ceremony, I sat on what could best be described as a king's throne in my mansion's audience chamber. I wanted to cross my legs haughtily, but I thought that might not look dignified, so I sat up formally.

Civil officials, military personnel, and knights filled the room. *Huh? We sure do have a lot of staff now. How many of these people are there, exactly? There's even over a hundred of them.*

Especially with being away so much, I hadn't realized House Banfield had accumulated such an overabundance of government staff.

Well, it had taken a lot of work in the beginning to get my inherited domain into shape, but it was nearing the hundredth year since I'd begun my second life here. House Banfield had started out poor, but we were now one of the richest families in the Empire.

I did have a lot of people working for me I could rely on...for the most part. My two top knights, Tia and Marie, were a bit questionable on that front, to be honest. They were more than competent when it came to work alone, but their personalities left a lot to be desired. I supposed I needed to work on upping the quality of my personnel a little more.

While I sat considering these matters, the ceremony carried on around me. I had tasked the knight who served as captain of my guard, Claus, with organizing the ceremony. He was a handy guy to have around and could accomplish pretty much any task he was given flawlessly. It made sense that Amagi had recommended him for the job, and I was determined to make good use of him in the future.

"Lord Liam."

I stood when Claus signaled me that it was time to address the crowd.

“Good work, everyone,” I began. “These last few years have been tough, but we’ve managed to vanquish Prince Linus and have moved Prince Cleo one step closer to the throne. I appreciate all your hard work in accomplishing this.”

It never got old seeing so many people kneel before me at once. It really boosted my sense of importance.

Slightly nervous, Claus moved on with the ceremony. “Next up...”

“Next are the rewards, isn’t it, Claus? Who was our highest achiever since our last ceremony? I’ll give them their reward personally.”

There were a lot of commendations to give out, so I’d be sending out medals and such later, but I wanted to personally congratulate anyone who went above and beyond here at the ceremony.

Hesitating for some reason, Claus finally came out with the name of the person who had been judged to have achieved the most in this period. “Chengsi Sera Tohrei... Please come forward.”

“Yes, sir.”

A woman with a mysterious allure about her came before me, and all eyes in the room riveted on the female knight. Tia and Marie watched her closely too, with bitter grimaces on their faces.

It was the beautiful Chinese-looking female knight who served as one of my guards. I chose her for the position just for her looks, but she apparently proved herself highly competent.

Claus explained Chengsi’s accomplishments. “Considering her past achievements and her actions during this recent conflict, Chengsi takes the top spot. She’s shot down over six hundred enemies, putting her in second place in all of House Banfield after only you, Lord Liam.”

“Six hundred?” I cocked my head, impressed, but I could hear Tia and Marie grumbling.

“What’s the point of counting individual kills?” Tia muttered.

“I could have shot down twice that number if I were given enough battlefields

to show my prowess,” Marie said just loudly enough for me to hear.

Sour grapes from the sore losers.

“She’s the only fighter to achieve those numbers in such a short period in the entire history of House Banfield,” Claus added. “However...”

I ignored Claus as he hesitated and turned to Chengsi, who stood before me with head bowed.

“Lord Liam, there’s something that I want from you, more than anything else,” she said.

It was rather fearless of her to use this opportunity to demand something of me. I didn’t hate that though, coming from such a valued underling. I loved competent people.

“Let’s hear it.”

Chengsi removed a hidden weapon from one of her loose sleeves: a cylinder that sprouted a blade, turning into a liuyedao. As the knights in the audience leapt to their feet in alarm, Chengsi took a stance with her saber and stepped forward.

“I want your head!” she said, discarding her mysterious air for a bestial smile.

Why are so many of the people who work for me so messed up? They were all talented, but there also seemed to be something wrong with every single one of them.

Chengsi leaped toward me, her sword whipping through the air just as fast as the Swordmaster’s blade. “Show me the skills you killed the Swordmaster with!”

Sometimes you met stupid knights like this, ones who had nothing else in their head but the passion to fight. Unlike the Swordmaster, however, I had no interest in putting Chengsi to the test.

“I see you’re another failure of a woman. I will compliment your speed, though.”

I unleashed the Way of the Flash to put an end to this embarrassing display.

Chengsi's eyes widened as her severed right arm, still holding the sword, flew across the room. Amazingly though, she seemed to kick against the air as if it were a springboard, jumping into a backward somersault and landing on her feet. While still in the air, she pulled out another hidden weapon with her remaining hand. Chengsi's second weapon was another cylinder that extended into a full-sized spear.

"You kicked off the air to get away?" I commented. "How interesting."

Suddenly, I became more excited than I'd been in my fight with the Swordmaster.

Chengsi's hidden weapon sprouted a blade, turning into another liuyedao.

"How many more tricks do you have up your sleeve? That spear's not a proper weapon for a duel. Hey, someone bring back her sword," I said to the room, stepping down the stairs.

I'd tried to kill her, but she'd avoided the lethal strike. In effect, Chengsi had defeated my Way of the Flash. I liked that she'd lost an arm but hadn't given up the fight yet too.

However, all of my other knights, Claus included, were rushing to stand in front of me or surround Chengsi.

An enraged Tia snatched a halberd out of the hands of one of the guards and held it before her. "How dare you dishonor Lord Liam at such an important ceremony?" she raged. "Don't think you'll get a quick death!"

Similarly, Marie's eyes looked almost crazed with anger as she wielded a straight blade in each hand. "I'll turn you into ground meat!"

You two still don't know a thing about what your master wants.

Disgusted, I yelled out a command to the entire room. "Everyone, stand down! Don't you dare steal my fun."

Claus turned to face me, surprised. "B-but..."

"Don't make me repeat myself. Tia, Marie, bring the lady her sword. We're going back to the starting line."

I took a vial filled with a regenerative potion out of my pocket. It was

something I kept on hand in case of emergencies, but I tossed it over to Chengsi, who caught it in her hand. I ordered the knights around us, “Hey, somebody bring over the arm I cut off, then we’ll use that potion to reattach it.”

The knights hesitated. “A-are you certain, my lord? She tried to take your life!”

“Yeah, but she wants to fight me. I’ll make fighting me her ceremony reward. She can’t have my head, though—it’s not so cheap a prize that I’d just give it away.”

Tia and Marie approached, all the while directing waves of fury at Chengsi. They brought with them Chengsi’s liuyedao, which looked like it had some hidden tricks to it.

I took the Chinese-looking saber and examined it. “Pretty nice—this should do. Here, take it.”

I tossed the saber over to her, and Chengsi caught it in the hand of her reattached arm. She telescoped her unneeded spear and hid it away again. She was breathing a little heavily from her ordeal, but when she had her sword back, she held it up, ready for a fight. It must have hurt like hell to reattach her arm, but she smiled through the sweat shining on her face.

“You’re bold,” she said to me. “I like that.”

“Bold? I just look bold to you? You’ve got to get your eyes checked out. That’s not what I’m about.”

If she was reducing me to simple boldness, then she was just another waste of a pretty face. I definitely liked how she looked, but like Tia and Marie, she wasn’t right for my harem.

As the people around us grew more tense, Chengsi came at me with her blade. I caught her stroke with my katana, and the fight sped up from there.

“Your swordplay is something else,” I told her. “This is a more useful experience than fighting that Swordmaster was.”

Chengsi returned my compliment with a kick toward my face. With her stilettos, one blow could end up being fatal.

I stepped back to avoid it, and this time she planted her feet and launched an elbow strike at me. Her swordplay incorporated a lot of martial arts—not that it was unusual. The Way of the Flash was the same. Normally, I only used a katana in one-on-one fighting, but my master had trained me in all sorts of other weapons too, not to mention my bare hands.

“Let’s see,” I said to myself. “Was it like this?”

I used a martial arts technique for when your sword had broken, one I hadn’t tried out in a long time. It used your opponent’s strength against them, and my move sent Chengsi spinning through the air. When her back slammed against the floor, her mouth opened wide, and spit flew from it.

I looked down at her as she twisted in pain. I scoffed, “Is that all you’ve got, after all? You want my head, don’t you? I gave you a chance, but it looks like your sword can’t even graze me.”

Chengsi slowly stood, her breathing quickening.

“Do you understand the difference in our abilities?” I asked.

I laid my sword against my shoulder, leaving myself wide open for her, and Chengsi rushed at me. I caught her blade easily with my own, but Chengsi’s sword suddenly opened like a fan, its razored edge curving toward my body.

“Lord Liam!” Tia shouted.

I gave Tia and Marie a cautioning look when they tried to intervene, grabbing the fan reaching toward my body with one hand.

“Ooh, that’s a new one. Neat trick.”

Chengsi looked startled that I easily thwarted her attack. Apparently, she was also surprised that I hadn’t anticipated the move before she implemented it.

“You could block that move even without having seen it before?”

“Is that so unbelievable? It’s simple to defend against any move with the Way of the Flash.”

Once during our training, Master Yasushi had attacked me with a whip. It was a special whip, and it was hard to tell how he would come at me with it, so at first it had been difficult to block his strikes. Thanks to that lesson, though, I had

effortlessly dealt with this attack from Chengsi.

I squeezed my fist and broke off the fan from its hilt. Chengsi instantly produced another hidden weapon. This one separated into two daggers, one for each hand, and she slashed them in front of her, ready to counter any moves I made with my own sword.

I was growing tired of all this.

“What, are you already out of tricks?”

I swung my blade and Chengsi avoided the blow. I had to admit it stung that she’d repeatedly dodged my fatal strikes. Had I been spending too little time on my daily training? *Looks like I’ll have to retrain myself.*

Yet Chengsi hadn’t escaped unscathed. Once she finished spinning away from me, she hit the ground missing her left arm and left leg. Of course, that wasn’t enough to stop her, so she used her remaining arm and leg to launch herself from the floor and go for my neck with one of her daggers clenched in her teeth.

I plunged my katana into her stomach as she leaped at me, skewering her straight through and pinning her to a pillar. I let go of my sword and left her there. Chengsi dropped her dagger from her mouth and spit out blood, glaring at me.

“Frankly, I didn’t expect you to dodge me at all,” I told her. “You’re good.”

As I complimented Chengsi, two knights with fearsome eyes approached from behind her, weapons in hand. They clearly intended to end her life.

An impassioned Tia demanded I hand Chengsi over. “Lord Liam, the contest is finished. Please give me the order to dispose of this fool.”

Marie had her own idea. “I’ll bring her back from the brink of death over and over again until she *begs* me to kill her.”

Nope, these two really don’t understand how I feel at all.

I faced the two of them and corrected their misunderstanding. “No one told you to kill her. In fact, I think I like her.”

Both of them frantically tried to convince me otherwise.

“B-but...”

“Lord Liam, she’s dangerous!”

And you two aren’t? They were dangerous in all sorts of ways.

Chengsi gave me a baffled look, also not understanding, but she also kept glaring at me as if she hadn’t given up yet. I liked that she was still hot to fight me, even in her current state. As a fighter, she was at the perfect level of strength where she was extraordinarily skilled, but just not enough to beat me. That meant I didn’t need to be afraid to have her at my side.

I pulled my katana out of the pillar and stood looking down at Chengsi. She sat in a heap on the floor. “That’s as much reward as you’ll get out of me today. The next time you want to challenge me, you’ll have to rack up more accomplishments first. Then, I’ll fight you again.”

Claus urged me to deal with Chengsi once and for all, disagreeing with my decision. “Forgive my saying so, but is that really wise? She tried to take your life during an award ceremony, Lord Liam!”

“What of it? I said I like her. No one is to kill her, all right? Now hurry up and treat her wounds. Okay, everyone, let’s move on with the ceremony. Come on, Claus, you’re in charge of the proceedings.”

Claus hesitantly turned away to resume the ceremony. “Y-yes, sir!”

Chengsi was carried away by medics, and the ceremony went on. In hindsight, I should have had us take a little break. After all, someone should have at least cleaned all that blood off the floor first.

“Master Liam! Why in the world would you retain such a knight at your side?” Brian wailed, having heard about the commotion during the ceremony.

If Brian were simply being annoying, then I’d just make him leave, but I didn’t know how to deal with him when he cried like this. I wasn’t enjoying the scornful look that Amagi was directing at me either.

“Knights like that will not learn their lesson, Master,” she lectured me. “They derive pleasure from fighting, no matter who they fight. She will only target you

again later.”

I had no doubt Chengsi would come after me again. I had already taken it into consideration.

“When she does, I’ll just turn the tables on her again. Anyway, her type is looking to fight challenging duels, not be sneaky and assassinate people, right? I’m not worried about her.”

Brian shook his head disdainfully. “Is it not ‘sneaky’ to go after you during a ceremony? Well, in any case, there was something else I wished to discuss with you.”

“Something wrong?”

“You could say that, yes. We don’t have enough soldiers anymore. We have them guarding our domain, guarding our new territory, patrolling the outskirts, exterminating pirates... Not to mention the soldiers we’ve provided to Prince Cleo. Aside from the ships undergoing maintenance, all of our military craft are staffed and currently in use.”

Amagi seconded Brian’s concern. “We have established a military school in our domain and are using it to bolster our ranks, but it is not enough. Our military brass suggests graduating some of the students early and implementing a draft.”

“A *draft*?”

Brian wiped sweat from his forehead, evidently sensing my darkening mood. “A-a partial draft. We’ve already scraped together all the reserve soldiers we can! Master Liam, I’m aware this is a critical time right now, but for that very reason I would suggest having your subjects share a bit of your burden—”

“Are you stupid?” I slammed my fists on my desk, and both of them both closed their mouths. “Conscript my subjects? Do you really think I’d allow that?”

Brian looked moved. Maybe he was misunderstanding me? “Oh, Master Liam, you value your subjects so much...”

Amagi, however, looked exasperated, no doubt sensing I had other motives

for rejecting a draft. “What are you thinking, Master?”

It should have been obvious, since my stance hadn’t changed for the whole time I’d been ruler. “The only one allowed to torment my subjects is me! I don’t want to conscript them because we need more manpower... I would only ever conscript them just for the heck of it!”

I couldn’t tolerate the idea of bleeding my subjects dry before my domain had reached its full potential for prosperity. If I was going to exploit them, it would be for my own amusement! I didn’t want to give that privilege to anyone else.

Brian hung his head. “There you go again. Well, if you don’t want to burden your subjects unnecessarily, then I will not encourage you to do so.”

Amagi said, “Nevertheless, the military personnel situation *is* dire. We cannot simply put the problem on hold, Master.”

The problem was they were trying to find a solution with our own numbers. The way I saw it, we needed to recruit the personnel from elsewhere.

“Just pull some troops from the Imperial Army.”

“There is a limit to how many troops we can request from them. Not to mention, bringing in outside troops invites the possibility of enemy spies.”

Very soon, we’d have to face Calvin, and other princes were sure to get involved in the ongoing succession conflict too. It was true that if I recruited military personnel from elsewhere, I would run the risk of spies infiltrating our ranks.

“What a bother.”

While I considered my options, Marie entered my office.

“Lord Liam, Mr. Thomas and Ms. Patrice have arrived. They have urgent business with you.”

“Thomas and Patrice? When I’m so busy already?”

I begrudgingly agreed to meet with them.

Sometimes my own good fortune scared me. “Guess all I can do is thank that

guy.”

Thomas and Patrice were confused by my muttering. “Thank who?”

“Nothing,” I told them. “Continue.”

Whenever I found myself in trouble, a solution always seemed to come my way. Rather than credit miracles for this, I was sure it was the Guide moving behind the scenes to help me. Nothing else made sense.

Patrice resumed her explanation of what had occurred. “I was approached by the Rustwarr Union and the United Kingdom of Oxys about accepting refugees. As a result of Prince Linus’s death, the rebellious factions he was supporting have lost a great deal of their influence.”

As I listened, I drank the tea Amagi had prepared for me. I’d requested an alcoholic drink like a proper villain, but Amagi had asked, “This early?” and given me a scathing look, so tea it was.

When the two merchants had finished their report, I snorted with amusement. “Well, I don’t want anyone who’s going to betray me down the line, but I *am* a little low on military personnel right now.”

Thomas wiped his sweating face with his handkerchief. “Well, the ringleaders will be dealt with by their nations, but the problem is all the people who were roped in as followers. Neither nation is sure what to do with the knights and soldiers who couldn’t disobey their superiors, and others who were only marginally involved.”

To draw a comparison from my past life, the situation was like a company that had gone bankrupt. The numerous, hapless employees weren’t responsible for the failure of the company, and now they had nowhere to go. It would be more convenient for their home nations for them to simply disappear, but they probably felt that it would be too extreme to punish them for what their superiors had done.

“We’ll take ’em,” I said. “I have plenty of space for them, after all.”

Amagi criticized me for making the decision so lightly. “Master, it will not be that easy to take in people from different political environments.”

“The Union is a democracy, right?”

It was run in a completely different way from the Empire, with its nobility system.

Patrice was also apprehensive. “Yes, the citizens there take part in their government. You may have people who try to introduce democracy into your domain, Lord Liam.”

“Democracy, eh? Can’t say I’m a fan.”

That didn’t surprise Patrice. “I wouldn’t expect you to be. I’ve only met a few nobles who are.”

“You’ve met some? There are actually nobles who approve of democracy?”

There really are nobles who like democracy in this feudal system?! That honestly surprised me. Well, there are always idiots everywhere.

Patrice explained, “Some nobles like the idea because they feel it would make things easier for themselves, while others truly believe it’s a positive political system.”

“Those people are deluded.”

I hated democracy because I had absolute authority in my own domain and I didn’t want anyone else to have a say. The political system itself wasn’t the problem; it was those who implemented it. In the end, democracy was imperfect because of the people who ran it, and sooner or later people ruined everything. I couldn’t entrust my well-being to others, so the current system, where I ruled as supreme leader, was the only one for me.

I looked at Amagi wordlessly, and she cocked her head in response. *How cute.*

“What is it, Master?”

“Nah, nothing.”

In times long past, the people of this alternate reality had failed by letting artificial intelligence run everything. Though, after seeing the terrible things humans were capable of, could I really blame them for that? Of course, it was people who’d created artificial intelligence, so in the end it had been proved imperfect for that very reason. Nothing that imperfect human beings created

could be perfect.

While I was looking at Amagi, my mouth seemed to have a mind of its own. “You’re so cute, Amagi.”

All other matters slipped from my mind as I stared at Amagi, who was as close as possible to my ideal of beauty. The blue-haired Lillie had moved my heart as well, but to me, Amagi was truly perfect.

Amagi bowed her head. “I appreciate the compliment. However, I am sure you are making your visitors uncomfortable, so I would suggest that you choose a better time and place for such comments.”

I cleared my throat, noticing that my two visitors wore rather awkward expressions as they watched me. I got back on topic. “It might cause problems to insert them all in the same place, so we’ll split them up—station them in different places. How does that sound?”

Thomas nodded. “You shouldn’t have any problems with the people from the United Kingdom, since they have a nobility system there as well.”

Patrice was frowning, still with her doubts. “Well, the Union would owe you if you took them in, but do you really think it’s a good idea? It would be a real problem for you if there were democratic movements in your domain, wouldn’t it?”

She didn’t understand me at all. If I were a good-hearted politician, maybe I would be worried about that, but I was a villain.

“I don’t mind people having differing beliefs, but if they cause chaos in my domain, I’ll just crush them. Simple as that.”

Thomas and Patrice gulped.

There was something else I was curious about, and I asked, “By the way, Thomas, what happened to that traitorous noble you had connections to? I was personally hoping he’d stick around.”

Thomas said, “He managed to escape responsibility by blaming his lord, so he’s holding on to his original position.”

He betrayed his own lord? I like this guy.

“That’s great! Let’s stay connected to him.”

The evil lords of other nations were doing their best as well, but I was resolved to never lose to any of them.

Enjoying my domain for the first time in a long while, I had the fun idea to go out for a stroll in disguise and execute anyone who was rude to me after revealing my identity. Finally, I could act like a real evil lord! Or so I thought...

“What’s the deal? There aren’t any dumbasses out here trying to pick a fight with me.”

I sat on a bench with an ice cream in one hand. I’d come to a part of town that was supposed to be more lawless, and things *did* seem a little disorganized here, yet everything was peaceful around me. There was even a fountain nearby with several food stands set up around it. *This* was the lawless part of town? I had pictured something more like a slum, but people were walking around here with their whole families in tow.

“I asked that cop where the bad part of town was. He must have lied to me.”

I decided to make sure that cop was demoted later.

In any case, tasty smells wafted to me from those food stands nearby, and as I watched the people having fun with their families, I couldn’t help but remember my past life. I used to go out on weekends with my own wife and kid, back when I was blissfully ignorant...when I lived in false happiness.

“I’m pissed now that I’ve remembered that.”

Watching the families was making me more and more irritated. I was just standing up to leave, munching on my ice cream, when I heard someone raise their voice.

“Watch where you’re walking, asshole!”

It appeared to be an altercation of some kind. Out of simple curiosity, I headed toward the angry voice, and found some people decked out like punks. They had black leather jackets, a bunch of spiky accessories, and spiked blond hair. One of the punks was threatening a mother and child, and I assumed the

child had bumped into him because ice cream had splattered his tight pants.

The mother held the child close to her protectively. “I-I’m so sorry. I’ll pay whatever it costs to clean it.”

Despite the mother’s apology, one of the man’s enraged lackeys stepped forward. “You’ll pay to clean it? Do you know who this man is? He’s the eldest son of Baronet Clover, who serves Baron Noden, one of the twelve great families that support House Banfield!”

The mother’s face paled at this information, and everyone looking on was surprised to hear it too. The spectators then started remarking on those “twelve families” the man had mentioned.

“Oh... The twelve families?”

“That’s not good. What’s going to happen to these two?”

“That poor kid’s unlucky to bump into someone related to the twelve families.”

I was speechless. *Who were these twelve families? Baron Noden was one of them?* A bunch of needy nobles had come around begging me for money, and Baron Noden was one of them, but these punks had it all wrong. Noden wasn’t doing anything to support me; Noden was having money troubles, and *I* was supporting *him*!

All you people mumbling about nobles... Why are you in awe of this third-rate loser? The guy you’re supposed to be in awe of is standing right here! I’m the king of this planet, so why are you afraid of some other guy?!

I felt rage bubbling up in me... In part at my stupid subjects, but mostly at the morons boasting like they were bigshots.

“Pretty gutsy of you to play the villain in *my* domain, you third-rate noble,” I grumbled.

Technically baronets weren’t even really nobles. They were more like a knight’s household, controlling a territory bestowed only to the original generation. The Empire didn’t want to grant land to each generation of a family every time one of their members became a knight, so their territory was

handed down ancestrally, and the size of that territory could vary a lot. Sometimes a hundred lords of a family vied for one territory they were crammed into, while other times a knight family might have a whole planet to themselves. Though, in the latter case, those tended to be undesirable planets with fewer than a million people on them. In the end, baronets were basically nobles without power, so I couldn't understand why the kid of one of those powerless nobles was throwing his weight around on my turf.

Ticked off, I tossed my half-eaten ice cream at the "eldest son." It hit him smack in the face, making a mess of him and plunging the scene into silence. Everyone turned to look at me, so I strode forward with a smirk on my face.

"So, what is it that happens if someone gets ice cream on you? I want to know too."

The trio of punks glared at me and stepped forward. Through gritted teeth, the baronet's eldest son said, "You take nobility lightly, brat? Guys—erase him."

The leader's two lackeys pulled out sword hilts, from which laser blades manifested. At this point I was shocked.

"Hey, wait a second. Do you guys seriously not recognize who I am?"

Wiping ice cream from his face, the leader screamed at me with spittle flying, "It's too late to chicken out now! Do it, boys! I'm sure the police won't care if some measly commoner goes missing."

From the leader's unconcerned attitude, I guessed he'd done this before. Were people who worked for me cleaning up after this guy's misdeeds? The thought made my blood boil. Once I got back to my mansion, I was gonna look into and punish anyone who had covered up this guy's crimes. The only one who could throw their weight around in my domain—the only one who could terrorize my commoners—was *me*.

I dodged the laser blades of the two men who rushed at me, grabbed them by their heads and slammed them into the ground without holding back. From their swords and manner I took them to be trained knights, so I didn't think that would kill them. I ignored them as they twitched on the ground, their faces buried in the pavement, unconcerned if they made it or not.

The blond leader was shocked at what I'd done. "Y-you're a knight too? Who do you serve? House Noden is crucial to House Banfield, you know! Do you understand that I serve the count's right hand?"

My irritation was only rising. *Who* was crucial? All those nobles who hounded me for money weren't good for anything, and I only supported them because I liked seeing them suck up to me. If they were throwing their weight around like this on my turf, though, then that was a different story.

"Are you such a useless mutt that you don't even know your master's face?" I asked. "Do you really think a piece of garbage like you can do whatever you want in my domain?"

The blond man pulled out a pistol and aimed it at me, but a knife came flying through the air and knocked it out of his hand. It had to have been thrown by one of Kukuri's men, guarding me unseen. A katana was also tossed into the air in front of me, so I caught it by its handle and stared down the man before me.

"Tell me," I demanded, "are you really a noble?"

The blond man shivered in terror, not understanding what was going on. "I-I am! You'll incur the wrath of Count Banfield if you kill me!"

The mother and child the blond man had threatened trembled when they heard this, and the onlookers started muttering to themselves, saying things like, "Lord Liam?" and "Lord Liam is ruthless!" and "If they make too much of a fuss, who knows what could happen to this whole area!" The spectators seemed scared out of their wits, which was fine with me.

"Count Banfield, eh? What about him?"

The blond man bulged his eyes, taking me for some outsider who didn't know who owned this planet. "What, you don't know? He shows no mercy to his enemies! He'll kill your whole family! You still want to mess with me? Killing me will mean going to war with House Ban—"

I reached my limit for annoyance, so I cut him down. As I watched the blond man's head drop to the ground, I muttered, "Worthless. That's it... House Noden's not getting any more assistance from me. They'll reap what they sowed."

Everyone around me had gone pale with horror, and finally, a cop car showed up. The instant the flying car landed, cops rushed out and surrounded me with weapons drawn. Clearly, some of them had even been trained as knights.

From out of nowhere, Marie appeared. I'd almost forgotten she'd been tailing me as my guard to keep an eye on me. She hadn't felt it necessary to protect me from those pathetic punks, but she couldn't take it anymore and leaped out in front of me as if descending from the sky. She barked at the cops, "You dare point your weapons at him? I'll cut you all down where you stand!"

The cops balked in fear as Marie brandished two cleaver-like swords at them. Then, one of them finally realized the truth.

"L-lower your weapons! That's Lord Liam!"

The crowd's murmurs grew louder.

"Lord Liam?"

"But he cut down a noble!"

"That's Lord Liam?"

When I'd killed that so-called noble in front of my subjects, they'd no doubt taken me for a violent thug.

Marie stood, looking down at the two knights whose heads were buried in the ground and the one I'd cut down. "Lord Liam, this is the eldest son of Baronet Clover and his underlings."

Apparently they had stayed at my mansion for a time and were now renting a home nearby. They seemed to have been using my domain as their playground, which in itself was fine, but I was the only one allowed to torment my subjects. There was no way I was going to let them get away with that.

"Call their family and their master, Baron Noden. I'll get to the bottom of this. They think they can do anything they want here, eh? Who the hell are these twelve families, anyway? I'll crush them all."

Marie smiled savagely. "Please allow me to serve as your sword hand. I swear I shall erase all of your enemies, Lord—"

She didn't finish, instead directing an intense stare behind me. At the same

time, I realized someone had grabbed the end of my scabbard. I turned around and saw the little girl in her terrified mother's arms, reaching out to me.

Marie protectively raised her sword to cut down the woman and child, but I grabbed her blade with my bare hand to stop her. "Stand down! I want to speak with them."

"Very well." Marie put her double swords away expressionlessly.

I was surprised. Normally I would have sensed someone before they could touch my sword's scabbard like that. I must have let down my guard simply because I didn't sense any hostility from them, so they'd gotten close before I realized it.

I knelt down to look the kid in the face, and she stared back at me directly. The cute red-haired girl wouldn't let go of my scabbard.

Her mother was terrified. "I-I'm sorry! I'm sorry! She doesn't know any better!"

Marie barked at her, "Doesn't know? She lives in this domain and doesn't know Lord Liam? A sin punishable by death! Perhaps a fate *worse* than death, depending on what you say next!"

Marie was so worked up she'd completely dropped the fake noblewoman tone she usually spoke with. All the people around us were completely terrified of her anger.

Hmm. Guess having her around comes in handy once in a while.

The stories these onlookers would have to tell would make good advertisement for what kind of dangerous knights I kept at my side. I bet I looked like a picture-perfect evil lord right about now! My only reference for that, really, was bad guys in period dramas from my former life, and I thought I was doing a pretty good job of playing one, but I couldn't be sure.

I shut Marie down. "Don't interrupt me, Marie."

"I-I apologize." Marie stepped back, chastened, and I looked down at the little girl again.

"What is it? You want my sword?"

I was a wealthy guy, so I had plenty of swords. This one had a good blade with some ornamental engraving. I'd bought it because it looked like a sword a rich guy would own, but it was beyond merely decorative, so I was pretty fond of it.

The girl cocked her head, gazing at the sword hidden inside its scabbard, and nodded. "It's pretty."

"Pretty?"

"The blade is pretty."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You saw it? What was engraved on the blade?"

"A gold kitty."

To be precise, it was a gold tiger set into the blade, not a cat, but they were both felines, so she wasn't wrong there. The point was, the Way of the Flash was supposed to be quicker than the eye could follow.

She saw the blade when I drew it? Even with the Flash?

I was thoroughly shocked that anyone, particularly this child, had actually followed my special move.

"What's your name?"

"Ellen! My name is Ellen Tyler."

She was young, but she answered my questions clearly, so I asked her another one.

"Are you interested in becoming a knight, Ellen? Can you devote your life to the sword? If you'll do that, I'll give you this blade."

The girl cocked her head again, and for a moment I doubted she understood what I'd asked, but then she grinned at me and gave a hearty nod.

"Okay!"

Epilogue

IN THE HIGH-CLASS HOTEL used by House Banfield on the Capital Planet, Ciel lay atop her bed on her stomach, dressed casually. A pillow was tucked under her chest, and she swayed her legs in the air as she spoke to her father, Baron Exner.

“So you’re stuck on the Capital Planet too, Father?”

“Looks like it. I don’t think I’ll be able to return home anytime soon. Anyway, what do you think? Will you be okay at House Banfield?”

As part of Cleo’s faction, Baron Exner would be busy on the Capital Planet for some time. He was worried about his daughter, but because Ciel didn’t want him to see her lounging around, their call was audio only. The baron called her often anyway, so Ciel didn’t feel the need to video call with him just now. She was honestly a little annoyed with all his fretting.

“I haven’t started my training yet, so I couldn’t say.”

“The count is a very strict person. You’ve heard the rumors, haven’t you?”

“What, about him going back to his domain and killing the heir to one of the families that serves him? Do you think that’s actually true?”

“According to what I’ve heard, it is. Kurt told me the count cut down the son of a baronet right on the spot for tormenting the people of his domain.”

Ciel didn’t like the respect that her father showed Liam when the count was so much younger than he was. *I know Liam’s higher ranked, but compared to my father, he’s practically a kid.*

Ciel knew that Liam was more successful than her father in pretty much every way, but she had some doubts about his character.

“No matter what terrible things that heir was doing, don’t you think it’s overkill to cut him down like that? I understand how the count must have felt, but he should have let the law handle it.”

“You’re still a child, Ciel. Trust me, the count is extremely virtuous for a noble, so there’s a lot you can learn from him. This is a good opportunity for you.” The

baron sounded somewhat exasperated with her.

“I’ll be sure to learn—you don’t have to worry about me!”

“Hey, I’m not—”

Sulkily, Ciel cut the call and buried her face in her pillow. *I hate him...*

Everyone around her was always singing Liam’s praises, but she just couldn’t bring herself to like him.

Ciel changed her clothes and left her room, heading for the hotel’s courtyard.

“I can’t believe my brother is finally getting married...”

She sat on a bench and sighed. The brother she’d always admired was currently in the middle of a marriage meeting, and she felt a complex mix of emotions about it. Part of her wanted to celebrate her brother’s happiness, but another part of her felt like his new bride was taking him away from her.

“My brother plans to be faithful with this woman, but what about Liam? He’s just awful about his fiancée, isn’t he?”

From the courtyard, Ciel watched Rosetta entertain some guests of Liam’s who had been visiting the hotel. Ever since his victory over Linus, Liam had been getting visits from nobles, merchants, and knights who wished to serve him almost daily. Rosetta, Liam’s fiancée, personally entertained his more important visitors, and at the moment she was seeing off a viscount and his wife.

Smiling, Rosetta said goodbye to the couple who’d come to get in Liam’s good graces, but when they were out of sight her expression turned weary. She then turned toward the courtyard, where she caught sight of Ciel.

Ciel sat up straight as Rosetta came walking toward her.

“Enjoying some fresh air?” Rosetta asked.

“Y-yes!”

“Would you care to have lunch? There’ll be no outside guests attending today, but you’re welcome to join us if you’d like.”

“I’d love to, but, um...won’t you be eating with the count?” Ciel glanced

around, but she didn't see Liam around.

Rosetta smiled awkwardly and explained, "It seems he's busy training."

"The count should be meeting his visitors himself, shouldn't he?"

One reason Ciel didn't like Liam was because he forced anything he considered busywork onto Rosetta. If he truly was training right now, then he was making practical use of his time and not just fooling around, but it seemed to Ciel like he was almost avoiding spending time with Rosetta.

"I suppose so," Rosetta said, "but Darling's always busy."

There it was: always busy elsewhere. Ciel felt for Rosetta.

It disgusts me too, that he has so many women serving him when he has such a devoted wife.

Conspicuously, Liam surrounded himself with too many beautiful women for Ciel's tastes. There were his knights Tia and Marie, and then there was Eulisia—the adjutant who had served him during his time in the military.

However, it was the blue-haired girl who had left the biggest impression on Ciel. She'd heard the girl's name was Lillie, and rumors about her abounded at the hotel. Ciel had overheard comments like, "*Lord Liam* picked up a woman?" and "So what's her story?" and "Someone really needs to invite her to visit the hotel right away!"

The hotel was practically in an uproar over her, which was another thing Ciel couldn't stand. Liam had never shown real interest in a flesh-and-blood woman before, so his vassals were sickeningly excited about his interest in this girl he'd met here on the Capital Planet.

These vassals are something else. The count already has poor Lady Rosetta, but they're overjoyed about him showing interest in another woman?

Maybe it was understandable on their part, considering Liam's inevitable need for an heir, but Ciel wished they'd consider Rosetta's feelings more. After all, Rosetta was just as aware as the rest of them that Liam had fallen head over heels for that blue-haired girl.

Ciel made up her mind to go for it and broach the subject to Rosetta herself.

“Are you really not bothered by it, Lady Rosetta?”

“By what?” Rosetta lowered her gaze, leading Ciel to believe that she knew exactly what she was being asked. Still, it seemed she didn’t want to answer the vague question.

“That Lillie girl. You’re so devoted to the count, Lady Rosetta, but he doesn’t even seem to notice. His vassals are all happy about that girl too. I think it’s terrible of them.”

Ciel was being awfully rude by bringing up the subject so boldly, but Rosetta only chided her gently. She understood the other girl was only speaking out of concern for her. Rosetta sat down next to Ciel on the bench and said, “Those vassals don’t work for me, but for House Banfield... You mustn’t forget that.”

“But...” Ciel wanted to protest that this situation was just too tragic, but Rosetta cut her off.

“That’s enough of that. Anyway, what would you like for lunch? Our friends from primary school will be joining us today. Oh, I wonder if Kurt will join us as well. I believe his meeting should be over soon.”

With Rosetta having changed the subject, Ciel gave up on trying to convince her of the unfairness of her position.

Ciel went to Kurt’s room to see if he would like to come to lunch with her and Lady Rosetta. She could have checked with him via call or text message, but she preferred to go see him in person, missing his face.

Kurt had indeed returned from his marriage meeting, and he admitted Ciel into his room, but immediately a call came for him. “Sorry, Ciel,” he said. “One of my professors from the military academy is calling me. Could you wait for a second?”

“Of course.”

Kurt stepped into another room for privacy while talking with his professor. They seemed to be discussing the fact that Kurt’s marriage meeting had been pushed back slightly due to all the commotion on the Capital Planet.

Left alone while Kurt spoke to his professor in the other room, Ciel headed to the bathroom to make sure she looked good for their lunch meeting.

“I don’t want to embarrass myself in front of the others,” she muttered to herself. “Boy, these nobles can’t even have lunch without it becoming some big gathering.”

Ciel entered the bathroom, and a storage closet caught her eye.

“Huh?” A long hair was caught in the closed closet door. “Rather sloppy cleaning for a fancy hotel like... Wait...”

Celia freed the strand of hair and saw it was blue. Having a bad feeling about this, she opened the closet door and discovered a white dress hanging inside. The blue hair had been stuck to its fabric. For a moment, Ciel wondered if that mysterious girl Lillie could possibly be romantically involved with Kurt too before arriving at a much more surprising truth.

“Why does my brother have that woman’s clo—ah!”

When Ciel took down the dress from its hanger, behind it, she found bottles lined up on a shelf. These were mostly common items to a girl like Ciel: tonics that changed the color of your hair or eyes when you drank them and other things of that nature. However, one bottle containing a pink fluid was unfamiliar to her. She picked it up for a closer look, and realized it was a drug to change one’s sex—and it looked as though it had been used more than once already.

“Wh-what does this mean?”



These drugs could temporarily change a person's sex, but their use was restricted within the Empire due to concerns about the strain they could cause to the user's body and mind. They were not drugs that were easy to get a hold of.

Ciel felt the puzzle pieces coming together in her mind. Kurt's odd behavior recently, the various hidden tonics, the white dress belonging to the blue-haired girl...

The answer she arrived at seemed undeniable. The blue-haired girl Lillie and Kurt were one and the same.

When she realized this, Ciel was stunned.

"At this rate, my brother...will become my sister!"

Ciel was so overcome with shock that she didn't taste a bite of her lunch. Somehow, she was able to interact with the people around her, but the thought that her brother might truly become her sister weighed heavily on her mind. Strangely, one part of this situation that greatly frustrated her was...

"She was prettier than me."

When he changed, the brother she admired so much was a cuter girl than she was. That shocked her. Then, there was the matter of the man her brother had spent time with in that guise. *Liam*.

"I knew my brother always talked about Liam a lot, but I can't believe it was *love* he was feeling and not merely friendship..."

He'd been talking about Liam more than ever recently and had even begun displaying pictures of him in his room. Ciel felt like her brother had been taken from her, and she found another reason to dislike Liam because of it.

"He can't just steal my brother from me!"

At this rate, she was going to have to start thinking of him as her sister, and she didn't want that. While she was stewing in her feelings, someone called out to her. She looked up and saw it was one of Kurt's friends, Eila.

“Hey, what are you sulking behind this pillar for?”

Ciel was curled up somewhere she had thought no one would find her, sitting behind a large column hugging her knees, but Eila had met Ciel before and recognized her.

“Eila...” she said, at a loss for words, her expression troubled.

Concerned, Eila sat down next to her. “Why don’t you tell me what’s bothering you? You might feel better if you get it off your chest.”

Ciel hesitated for a moment, but decided that as Kurt’s longtime friend, Eila could be trusted. “The thing is...I’m worried that my brother has feelings for the count that go beyond friendship.”

When she heard this, Eila’s eyes positively sparkled. “So it looks that way to his sister too? It does, doesn’t it? Those two really do get along so well... Their relationship has long surpassed simple friendship!”

Ciel wasn’t sure what to think, seeing Eila become electrified with glee. *Huh? What’s with her? She seems thrilled about this.*

Pulling herself together, Ciel continued, “But I just can’t bring myself to like the count.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“Well, he has so many women serving him, but he completely ignores Lady Rosetta!” Ciel said. “It’s cruel!”

Smiling, Eila replied, “It does appear that way, doesn’t it? Still, Liam’s actually looking out for Rosetta in his own way.”

“He is?”

“We all went drinking together recently, and Liam was so excited about managing to pick up a girl.”

Ciel only disliked Liam all the more as she imagined his excitement, but Eila chuckled.

“When he was talking about that, though, he couldn’t look at Rosetta’s face at all... And after we changed the subject, he kept glancing over at her to see how

she was feeling.”

“He did?”

“Not to mention, he didn’t do anything more than hold hands with that blue-haired girl. He actually got mad when we teased him about that. You see? Liam’s actually quite pure.”

Hearing this, Liam seemed very young to Ciel, despite being the same age as her brother.

“Liam must have felt bad for Rosetta after spending time with that girl,” Eila continued, “I heard he brought her a present when he came back. Isn’t that cute?”

“I-I guess...”

All of a sudden, Ciel didn’t know what to think about Liam. *Is he not really as bad as I thought?* Still, there was one thing she couldn’t let him off the hook about...

“Please don’t hate Liam,” Eila said. “People tend to get the wrong idea about him.”

“Do they? Still, I want to do something about his relationship with my brother...”

“What? Why? There’s nothing wrong with it, is there? Their relationship is so wonderful!” Obviously, Eila didn’t realize the full extent of things.

Ciel came out with what she really wanted to confide in her about. “It seems like my brother is considering a sex change. I know it’s not all that uncommon, but when I think about my own brother doing it, I just can’t believe it. After all, my brother makes such a fantastic man, doesn’t he? He’s practically perfect... Huh?”

Ciel had been speaking passionately about her brother, but she shuddered when she caught sight of Eila’s face. The excited smile Eila had been wearing up had disappeared, replaced by a blank expression, the light gone from her eyes.

“Huh? Sorry. What?” Eila said dully.

“Err, well...”

“What is Kurt trying to do? Tell me again.”

Frightened by Eila’s sudden change, Ciel replied, “He wants to become a girl and date the count! The blue-haired girl... She’s my brother.”

The blue-haired girl they’d just been talking about was actually Kurt, and when Eila heard this she laughed dryly.

“Ah ha ha. There’s no way. That absolutely cannot be.”

“Huh? But sex changes themselves aren’t all that uncommon, are they?”

Some people were even of the opinion that you couldn’t consider yourself a proper adult until you’d experienced being both male and female. Sometimes a person would create a family as a man, and then go on to form another family as a woman. Hence, sex changes weren’t at all unheard of, but when your own family experienced such a thing, it tended to take a little while to get used to. Moreover, for Ciel, this situation had an extra layer of complexity...

“I don’t know what to do... I hate to think that the blue-haired girl who’s caused Lady Rosetta so much grief is actually my brother. Personally, I’d rather that my brother gave up on the count, and—eek!”

Eila had grabbed hold of Ciel’s shoulders and squeezed, wearing a fervent expression as if she’d just found a kindred spirit.

“Right? *Right?* It’s better when they’re both boys! Kurt’s much better the way he is now!”

When she saw how Eila was practically breathless with passion, Ciel realized...

She’s my enemy too!!!

This woman had wicked feelings toward her brother.

“What is the meaning of this, Master? I heard that what you bought from the Sixth Weapons Factory was only a mobile knight and the facilities necessary for the craft’s maintenance.”

Amagi had finally found out. When I’d bought the Vanadís, the luxury mobile knight, a battleship had come with it as a set. It was like ordering sushi and

having a steak come with it. No, that wasn't quite right. Was it like buying a foreign luxury car that came with an RV? I couldn't perfect the comparison, but in any case, here I was.

"Yeah, funny how that happened. Is the Sixth just really generous? Ah ha ha... I'm sorry."

I had hoped to play it off, but with Amagi displaying my purchase history in front of me showing that I'd already paid for the ship in full, there were no excuses I could make to defend myself.

Damn you, Mason. It wasn't really his fault, but I was in an awkward spot right now. *Are you stupid, including a whole battleship with that thing?*

Amagi was even more angry than she usually got when I did something impulsive. "I believe I requested that you refrain from making unplanned purchases since it interferes with our budget."

"Y-you've got it all wrong!"

"I have what wrong?"

"It's like... Y'see..."

"See what? Please, finish. What is it that I am supposed to see?"

Amagi was really pressing me, and she only did that when she was mad—and I mean furious.

What do I do? What can I do here? Can I get away with a simple apology? If I back down, though, I'll lose face...

Just then, I remembered Lillie, who had ridden in the Vanadís with me. For some reason, Kurt's face popped up in my mind too.

"Amagi, I bought the mobile knight and the battleship because I'll be needing both of them."

"And what exactly do you need them for?"

Normally, at this point she might cock her head cutely, but she was so angry she was rigid. Still, I knew how to get myself out of this tight spot.

"Kurt's been under too much pressure lately."

“Are you telling me you bought them for House Exner?”

“That’s right. Soon they’ll be having an Imperial princess join their family. They should have a mobile knight and a battleship worthy of their new station, shouldn’t they?”

“There are plenty of other—”

“Of course I’ll support them in other ways as well, but House Exner is too frugal for a noble family.”

For how much they bled from their subjects, they did live rather prudently. They tended to hoard their money, and they didn’t spend a lot of it on warships and mobile knights.

Amagi brought her fist up to her chin. “I suppose some degree of ostentation is desirable in noble society. It is not a terrible idea.”

“Right?”

I sighed with relief, feeling like I’d survived a battle, and Amagi smiled—though the smile was still a tad scary.

“I will relent this time, but there will not be another.”

I guess she saw right through me and knew I only came up with that reasoning on the spot.

“Yes, ma’am.”

It felt like she had me in the palm of her hand, but since it was Amagi, I didn’t resent it too much. If someone else tried to control me the way she did, I’d cut them down on the spot, of course.

I was just beginning to relax, thinking the matter was closed, when Amagi asked me about receiving the craft.

“Will the Vanadís and its accompanying ship be sent directly to House Exner, then?”

“No, I want it sent to the Capital Planet first. Baron Exner will be there for a while, anyway, and I want to see the finished product for myself.”

“The ‘finished product’?”

The time had come for me to leave my domain and return to the Capital Planet. As I approached my superdreadnought, Ellen walked at my side. My toddling little apprentice carried the katana with the tiger engraving, which she had dubbed the “kitty katana.” No matter how many times I tried to tell Ellen it was a tiger, she kept calling it that. In any case, she carried the extravagant katana I’d gifted her with as if she treasured it.

“I’ll be busy for a while, Ellen,” I told her.

“Yes, Master!”

I had mixed feelings about Ellen calling me “Master.” As a swordsman, I felt my own skills were still in development, so was it really okay that I was taking on an apprentice? I wasn’t sure, but Master Yasushi *had* told me that my goal should be to train three apprentices since I was obligated to train new students if I wanted the Way of the Flash to survive. It was a promise I’d made to my master, so evil lord or not, that promise was one I planned to keep. When it came to the Way of the Flash, at least, I’d decided not to concern myself with personal gain. Still, I couldn’t help fretting whether I could really train Ellen to be a decent swordsman.

“Once we get to the Capital Planet,” I said, “I’m tossing you into an education capsule.”

“Okay!”

“And when you’re out of the capsule, I’ll teach you the basics.”

“I-I’ll do my best!”

It had been a few months since I’d taken Ellen under my wing, and she did seem interested in the Way of the Flash. First thing, I’d copied my master by demonstrating a special technique for her. When I’d initially met Master Yasushi, I really hadn’t understood just how amazing he was. Now, years later, I’d beaten a Swordmaster, but I still couldn’t imagine myself ever beating Master Yasushi. In his own demonstration to me, he’d cut those logs as though he weren’t even drawing his sword at all. When would my own sloppy moves ever reach his level of perfection?

Ellen looked toward the servants who had come to see us off, knowing that her mother was among them. I could see she looked a little forlorn.

“What, you miss your mom?”

Ellen had been raised by her mother alone. When she’d become my apprentice, I’d taken on her mom as a servant at my mansion so Ellen wouldn’t have to worry about how her she was faring. I wanted her to be able to focus on her training comfortably, after all.

“I-I’m okay.”

Ellen was at an age where she should still be completely dependent upon her mother, but she was doing her best to stay strong without her. I have to admit I wasn’t too fond of kids normally, but Ellen was my precious pupil—one with the important responsibility of continuing the Way of the Flash. As such, I had to make sure I didn’t treat her badly.

“Once my noble training’s done, we’ll head right home,” I assured her. “Just be patient until then.”

“I will.”

We boarded the superdreadnought and my knights met us inside, lined up in neat rows. Chengsi was among them, so I stopped right in front of her and gave her a bold smile.

“Looks like your injuries have healed up nicely.”

“Thanks to you, my lord.”

“Are you going to try me again?” I asked her.

Chengsi’s spirit wasn’t broken in the slightest. “Of course,” she answered gleefully.

Everyone around her looked nervous, but I burst into laughter.

“I knew I liked you! If you can rack up more achievements, I’ll humor you again. Do some good work for me now, you hear?”

“I will, sir. I look forward to it.”

I continued past Chengsi, and Ellen followed after me.

“Umm... Master...”

“Yeah?”

“That lady was kind of scary.”

I stopped and said, “I guess so. She does want to kill me, after all.”

“Huh?”

Ellen was surprised, but now wasn’t the time to give her all the gritty details.

“I’ll tell you all about it when you’re older. Now, come on... I’ll give you some basic lessons on the ship before we get to the Capital Planet. My apprentice needs to be strong, after all.”

“Yes, Master!” Ellen responded brightly.

I got my hands on a good apprentice, didn’t I? So far, Ellen seemed diligent, and while only time would tell whether she could inherit the Way of the Flash or not, I thought there was at least a good chance of it. After all, natural ability was important, but it was more important that she showed a keen interest in learning. She would be strong, I knew it. No... I would *make* her strong.

This and some other things had been going well for me—*too* well, one might say—and if I didn’t know any better, I might think they were miracles, but I didn’t believe in miracles. With karma as bad as mine, it made no sense that heaven would bestow gifts on me. I was sure my good fortune lately was all thanks to the Guide. As I entered my ship, I made sure to send my gratitude to the Guide, even though I had no idea where he might actually be right now.

“I pray that my gratitude reaches him,” I muttered.

“Master?”

“Hmm? Oh, just giving thanks for having met you. You say a prayer of thanks too, okay?”

“A prayer? Oh, okay.”

So my diligent apprentice Ellen closed her eyes to pray too, and I wondered: *Are our feelings reaching you, Guide? May my gratitude, and that of my student, reach you wherever you are!*

After Liam had boarded the superdreadnought, one of its missile hatches opened. A golden-hued missile shifted into firing position, watched over by a spirit in the form of a dog. The dog howled, and as if on that command, the missile was launched. Unknown to even Liam, the ballistic missile's warhead had become filled with his gratitude for the Guide, along with Ellen's gratitude for Liam. Carrying this payload of pure energy, the missile flew off into space. It didn't have the range to make it all the way there on its own, so a warp gate manifested before it, and the missile disappeared through it.

Meanwhile, the ship's bridge crew was frantic.

"Hey, one of the missile hatches just opened on its own!"

"There's a slight warp reaction, off the ship's bow!"

"Somebody find out what just happened!"

The crewmen all scrambled to figure out what was going on, but the hatch had already closed, and the warp reaction vanished as though nothing had happened.

At the same time, the dog's spirit vanished too.

Operating behind the scenes in distant intergalactic nations, the Guide was streaking along merrily to the next planet.

"Oh, it's so comfortable out here! Liam's feelings of gratitude can barely reach me. There's still a bit of lingering pain, but it's a lot better than the agony I was feeling before."

The Guide had been collecting negative feelings in these other nations, and stoking fires of discontent wherever he found them. A walking disaster—that was the Guide.

"I just need to keep building up my strength so I can crush the entire Algrand Empire, and Liam along with it, and... Oh? I see something..."

The Guide stopped and looked into the distance, where he spotted a light. It was a warp gate, and as he watched, a golden missile came shooting out of it.

“Ugh... That gold is so tacky! It annoys me just looking at it.”

Liam’s feelings of gratitude often came to the Guide in gold, due to Liam’s fondness for that precious metal. Because of this, the Guide had grown to despise the hue. *Just who does that tacky thing belong to? I’ll be sure to make them unhappy while I’m here.*

“Some sort of accident, perhaps?”

The Guide had just begun descending toward the planet, where he intended to harvest more negative emotions, when he glanced toward that missile again and realized it was headed straight for him.

“Huh?”

It was then that the Guide finally noticed.

“Th-that tacky gold missile couldn’t be... Not Liaaaaam?”

The Guide quickly tried to change directions, but the missile had almost reached him by now. It detonated just beside him, and the Guide was caught up in the explosion.

“Noooooooooooo! I-it’s hot! I’m burning! Feelings of gratitude—a-and from *two* people? But I haven’t even done anything this tiiiiime!”

In addition to Liam’s usual feelings of gratitude, which the Guide absolutely despised, there were thankful feelings from a pure-hearted child as well. The energy of these feelings expanded and burned the Guide until he plummeted to the planet’s surface as a charred husk. Through all this, he was able to use the power he’d stored up to cling to life, but in the process all the negative energy he’d built up was reduced to basically nothing.

On the planet’s surface, the Guide stood up and cried out, “You won’t get away with this, Liam! Do you know how much work I went through to gather that power? Dammmiiiiit!!! I swear I *will* kill you!”

As the scorched and tattered Guide stood there and screamed, a digital newspaper flapped by in front of him. He looked down at the discarded sheet and saw a headline about the Rustwarr Union signing a deal with Liam’s House Banfield. For a moment, the Guide was stunned, but he quickly picked up the

newspaper to read the article. When he did, he learned that Liam had gotten around the economic sanctions imposed on him by making use of the rebellions within the Union that the Guide himself had caused.

“B-but I didn’t even do anythiiiiing!!!”

The Guide fell to the ground again, dumbstruck over how his own actions had inadvertently helped Liam.

Watching the Guide from a hidden spot was the dog spirit. The dog had carried the newspaper in its teeth and dropped it where the Guide would see it. Satisfied by his reaction, the dog left the Guide to sob and pound the ground with his fist.

“This is just too muuuuuch!!!”

By the time I returned to the Capital Planet, my delivery from the Sixth Weapons Factory had arrived.

“Well? Incredible, right?” I said when I presented my gift to Kurt. “It’s the pride of the Sixth Weapons Factory—the Vanadís Frey!”

“I-it is pretty impressive.”

The Vanadís had been delivered to a spaceport in orbit around the Capital Planet. Unlike when it had been displayed at the mobile knight event, it now had additional armoring. Consequently, the frame that had been quite feminine previously now resembled that of a more conventional-looking mobile knight. Because of these changes, its name had been updated also, to “Vanadís Frey.” Nearby, staff dispatched by the Sixth bustled around the Vanadís, making sure everything was in order.

Kurt gave me a strained smile. “But this... Vanadís? House Exner will never be able to pay for its maintenance.”

“Oh, I’ll shoulder the maintenance costs. This is in return for me forcing you to take in the Imperial princess. What did you think, by the way?”

“She was nice.”

“Think you’ll be able to get along?”

“Yeah...”

“That’s good.”

I was sure the sudden marriage talks had been a bother for Kurt, not to mention he seemed tired lately. In any case, given our friendship, I didn’t think the Vanadís was a wasteful purchase.

Kurt returned to his room in the hotel. With his wedding meeting over, tomorrow he’d have to return to the military academy. He stood in the bathroom looking at himself in the mirror, naked after his shower.

“What does it mean that Liam gave me that craft? I’m curious why he did that with the armor too...”

Liam and Lillie had bonded over the Vanadís. The fact that Liam had given it to Kurt seemed significant. It might only have been a coincidence, but Kurt couldn’t help seeing the symbolism in the feminine-looking Vanadís being hidden underneath the new armor. The craft looked more masculine now, but its true self on the inside was feminine.

Kurt held his head. “Why did I go and do that? At first, I just wanted to make sure my feelings were really just friendship, but...n-now it’s like...it’s like I...”

He shook his head, trying to shake these thoughts from it, but it was no use.

Kurt looked at the various bottles lined up on their shelf. “I should get rid of these, shouldn’t I?” If he were caught with the sex change drug, he would suffer a fine, but he couldn’t leave it here at the hotel.

But maybe I shouldn’t get rid of it here either, in case someone sees me do it. Maybe it’s better to dispose of it another way...

Making excuses to himself, he reached out to the bottles. Kurt drank from several of the tonics, and not long after, various changes began to occur.

The first thing to change was the color of his eyes, which turned gray, after which his hair turned blue. His short, slightly curly hair rapidly became long and straight, and most dramatically, his body transformed from male to distinctly female.

Now, before the mirror stood Lillie. Strangely, the changed Kurt—Lillie—reacted in a very different way from what Kurt had been feeling. Unlike the regretful Kurt, Lillie seemed delighted to see her body reflected before her. Her thought processes were so unlike Kurt's that it was as though she had a different personality.

Touching her cheeks with both hands, she was trying to massage the grin from her face. "A present from Liam—I'm so happy! Maybe the reason he's acting like this is because he's sensed—"

Unlike the anguished Kurt, Lillie simply blushed happily.



Bonus Story:

Mass-Produced Maid Tateyama

S*OMETIME BEFORE Liam began his training...*

“No, no, no!”

An irritated Liam sat in his office with a disappointed Brian standing before him. In Brian’s hands were some prototypes of Liam merchandise.

“You don’t like these either?”

“Selling merch of me? Are you stupid? Who the hell would buy any of this?”

Brian was holding some cartoonish plush toys meant to portray Liam. Various companies in Liam’s domain had produced merchandise like this and brought it to him in the hopes of obtaining the rights to sell it, but Liam had rejected each and every request.

Brian insisted that Liam was popular enough to warrant it. “If so many companies are making these proposals, it’s evidence that there’s a demand for these products.”

Liam was beloved by his subjects, and these companies were certain that any products associated with him would sell like hotcakes, but Liam still wouldn’t allow any merchandise bearing his likeness to be sold.

“What would people want to do with dolls of me? Stick pins in them?”

“Why would you think that?” Brian asked, mystified.

“Because that’s what I would do!” Liam snapped. “I’ll never let them sell dolls of me! Make all these companies understand that!”

Liam was firm on this, and it didn’t matter who the request came from.

Watching him from the corner of the room was one of his mass-produced maid robots, Shirane. As always, she stood silently by the wall, but her field of view was filled by comments in little speech bubbles from the social network she shared with the other maids.

Another maid robot named Shiomi commented: *“Master has rejected all the proposals again! I’m afraid they’ll never be able to sell Lord Liam dolls!”*

More and more comments popped up after her speech bubble.

“Maybe we should just make our own.”

“But it’s important that they’re officially branded!”

“There must already be unofficial Master dolls going around, don’t you think?”

As they often did, the maid robots were having a lively chat in a manner the humans were unaware of.

While Shirane’s view was completely filled with comments, Liam slammed his hands down on his desk.

“I’ll never allow any merchandise of me to be sold, period!”

In the maid robots’ breakroom were several maintenance beds, on which a few maids were currently lying down. The lids of the beds were closed as the maids inside underwent maintenance processes.

In a corner of the room stood a small desk that one of the maid robots had brought in. Atop the desk was a selection of outdated tools such as scissors, needles, tape measures, and several other items, and using these was Tateyama, who was particularly taciturn even for a maid robot. The maid robots hardly ever conversed using their mouths, instead communicating through the network they shared, but Tateyama hardly ever contributed to even those conversations.

Arashima, who had come to the breakroom in order to use one of the maintenance beds, noticed Tateyama. “What are you doing?” She’d gone out of her way to ask using her mouth, since she knew Tateyama hardly ever made use of the network.

Tateyama turned around, clutching a half-finished doll. “Making a doll.”

“You’re using awfully outdated tools,” Arashima noted, with the implication that newer ones would allow Tateyama to complete the doll more easily.

Tateyama understood what she was getting at. “I like this way better.”

“I don’t understand that.”

It was a mystery to Arashima why Tateyama would do something so pointless, but Tateyama similarly couldn’t understand how Arashima didn’t appreciate the difference. She glanced at the hair accessory Arashima wore, and asked, “Well, why do you wear so many accessories?”

Arashima wore several other accessories in addition to the one in her hair, having won them from other maid robots in contests between them.

Arashima cocked her head. “Accessories are an important way for us to express our individuality. Thus, I feel that the more of them I obtain, the more individual I become.”

That made sense to Tateyama. “An act of individuality. You see?”

“I still don’t get it.” Arashima cocked her head again, but Tateyama just returned to her work.

“I need to finish this. I only have 32 minutes and 51 seconds remaining in my break,” she said, implying that she’d wasted time speaking to Arashima.

Confused, Arashima turned away and headed for a maintenance bed.

Liam had sensed a strange vibe in the air at the mansion that day, and the reason for it had just walked into his office.

“T-Tateyama, what is that...?”

Liam had proclaimed just a short while ago that he would never allow dolls modeled after him to be produced. He was now befuddled. The reason for this was something Tateyama was holding in her hands. It was Amagi who had brought Tateyama to his office, and Liam could tell just from looking at Amagi how exasperated she was with the other maid robot.

“It seems Tateyama was crafting this by hand in the maids’ breakroom. You forbade the production of such items entirely, so I came here to report her activities,” Amagi explained. Then she commanded, “Tateyama.”

Tateyama stepped forward obediently. In her hands was a doll that was clearly modeled after Liam. Everyone had heard about Liam exploding with rage at the notion of dolls modeled after him, so what would happen when one of the robot maids he adored showed up with one in her possession? No one in the mansion could guess.

“I’m sorry,” Tateyama said in her usual inexpressive voice, proffering the doll to Liam.

Liam took it, clearly at a loss as to how to respond.

Amagi tilted her head. “Are you not going to scold Tateyama, Master?”

Liam’s shoulders twitched. Then he looked down at the doll for a few silent moments. “Th-this is well made! It’s actually kinda cute too!”

Tateyama’s gloom lifted at Liam’s reaction, just enough that Liam could tell from the robot’s subtle expression. “Thank you,” she said, so quietly he almost didn’t hear her.

Brian was also present, and when Liam praised the maid’s doll, he became exasperated, since he had only ever received Liam’s ire when bringing up the making of dolls. “You’re contradicting yourself, Master Liam! You hardly even looked at the prototypes I presented to you!”

Liam found it rather laughable that Brian was competing with a maid robot for his approval.

“Oh, shut up, Brian! Tateyama’s normally so quiet and reserved, but she put so much effort into this doll!”

Everyone present was shocked by his words, and the reason for their surprise was simple. From anyone else’s perspective, the maid robots were *all* quiet and expressionless. They hardly made any noise, which set them apart from the human servants.

Brian stammered, “She’s different from the others? To me, all the maid robots seem the same.”

Liam gave Brian a look that suggested he was utterly disappointed with him. “What are you, blind? They’re all unique. Arashima’s all showy and cute

because she loves accessories, and Shiomi's always trying to win big in the contests they hold with each other. Since Tateyama's introverted and timid, it makes you want to protect her, doesn't it?"

Liam clearly expected Brian to agree with him, but Brian was at a loss for words.

Holding the doll of himself, Liam asked Tateyama, "So you made this by hand?"

"Yes... I think it's cute."

"I-I see. Well, I did forbid companies from making things like this, but I guess I can permit you to have one just for personal use."

It seemed to be Liam's personal policy that his maid robots got special treatment.

Amagi had more to report to Liam, however.

"Master, it was not just one doll that Tateyama crafted. She has made several more of this doll, as well as a number of other items."

"Huh?"

"They're all handmade," Tateyama explained.

"I-I see. You really work hard at this, huh? That's...commendable."

It was clear to Amagi and Brian that Liam's fondness for his robots made him want to praise Tateyama somehow, but this only made things worse by encouraging her. She proceeded to tell Liam about her dream.

"I want to make a lot of merchandise of you, Master...and open a store," she confessed, embarrassed but earnest.

Liam didn't want to hurt Tateyama's feelings by automatically rejecting her idea, so he had no idea what to say. "Ohh... Wh-what do I do about this?"

Seeing how pathetic his master was acting, Brian murmured, "I wish you would consider more serious matters with this same level of solemnity."

At a later date, in a secluded area of House Banfield's vast mansion, Tateyama

set up a small stand and laid out Liam merchandise atop its counter.

“I’ll...do my best...” she said to herself.

Liam and Amagi watched her from behind a distant pillar.

“Why are we hiding?” Amagi asked Liam.

“Tateyama wants to do this all on her own, so I thought we should give her some privacy.”

“I see. I am still dubious about some of her decisions, however. Why did she set up her shop in such a secluded spot? I believe this is ill-advised.”

Liam agreed that Amagi had a point. “True, it’s not a good move business-wise, but Tateyama’s really shy. It would be hard for her to be surrounded by a bunch of people all of a sudden, right? That’s why she picked this spot, just to get used to running the shop first.”

“Do you speak with Tateyama often, Master?”

“I can tell what she’s thinking by looking into her eyes.”

Tateyama hardly even communicated with her fellow maid robots, but somehow Liam could understand her feelings. There was no indication that they spoke together with any frequency, so Amagi didn’t know how that could be.

They watched over her for some time, but due to the remoteness of the location, no one stopped by her shop. Liam was beginning to feel anxious for her.

“I can tell Tateyama’s starting to get nervous because no one’s coming by. Amagi, close off some of the main halls in the mansion so that people are forced to come this way.”

Amagi agreed to Liam’s order without asking how he’d drawn his conclusions just by watching Tateyama from a distance.

“Very well, Master.”

Not long after, Tia came down the hall, grumbling to herself. “Why didn’t anyone notify us that the hall was blocked off? At this rate, I’m going to be late to the mission Lord Liam entrusted me...*wiiiiith!*”

As soon as she spotted Tateyama's shop, Tia's annoyance turned to excitement and she ran toward it. With great fervor, she looked over the handmade goods on display.

"These are dolls modeled after Lord Liam? B-but I heard their production was completely banned in his domain! Wh-what are they doing here?"

Tia was thrilled to see Liam dolls for sale, but at the same time she knew they shouldn't be there, so she was completely thrown for a loop. She looked up to see who was running the shop and found Tateyama watching her.

"Welcome..."

The maid robot did her best to smile. At least, that was how Liam would have interpreted her expression, but to Tia it was just a blank face. Moreover, Tia didn't know Tateyama by a name, but simply as one of the maid robots, and seeing a robot running this stand confused her all the more.

"A maid robot is selling these things? What should I make of this?"

If someone was breaking the rules, Tia knew she should stop them, and yet it was one of Liam's beloved maid robots doing this thing. Tia wondered if she should apprehend the offending maid or overlook this transgression.

Watching from behind the pillar as Tia stood frozen with indecision, Liam clicked his tongue. "You idiot—you're stressing Tateyama out. If you're gonna buy something, hurry up and do it."

Amagi was exasperated by Liam's misanthropy. "You have no patience for your fellow humans, do you, Master?"

"Humans are the least trustworthy beings around. You're different, of course. I trust you robots because you're never deceitful."

"I appreciate it," Amagi said.

Another person approached the souvenir stand, and they saw it was Brian.

"May I purchase one?" he asked Tateyama.

"Of course."

When Tia saw that Brian wished to buy one of the Liam dolls, her mind was

made up and she sprang into action.

“Sell them all to me!”

Tia demanded that she be sold the entire stock of dolls, but Tateyama politely shook her head.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have many products... It’s only one per person.”

“Waaaaagh! But each one’s a little different—how am I supposed to choooooose?!”

When Liam saw Tia burst into tears over the dolls, his face took on an expression that even he couldn’t have described.

Brian came walking toward the pillar, evidently having spotted Liam and Amagi there. “Master Liam,” he said, “you should have told everyone that you gave Tateyama permission to make these sales.”

Under other circumstances Liam would have stubbornly ignored Brian’s criticism, but since Brian had helped Tateyama make her shop possible, he expressed his honest thanks to his aged butler. “You’re actually pretty thoughtful, aren’t you, Brian?”

“Don’t you think you might have arrived at that conclusion earlier, considering the fact that I’ve been by your side ever since you were born, Master Liam? Well, regardless, do you think you could sign this doll of mine?”

“Huh?”

Brian held his doll out to Liam, and he even had his own autograph pen handy, being the well-prepared man that he was.

Face twitching, Liam took the pen. “What do you want with my autograph?”

“I plan to give this doll to a child of an acquaintance of mine. He’s a fan of yours, and—aaah! Please don’t sign it so sloppily, Master Liam!!!”

“Oh, screw you! Anyway, I’m just glad Tateyama looks happy now.”

As Tia cried and deliberated over which doll to buy, Tateyama seemed pleased that she’d managed to sell one of her handmade items.

At least, she seemed pleased according to Liam.

Afterword

SO, *I'm the Evil Lord of an Intergalactic Empire!* Volume 5 is finally out! Did you enjoy this volume too? And about the heroine on the cover... Yeah, uhh... I'm sorry (ha ha).

To be honest, I didn't think the series would go on for this long, and I certainly didn't think it would win #5 Overall, #1 in the Web Bunko category, and #1 for Male Readers in *Kimirano's 2021 Tsugi ni Kuru Light Novel Awards*. Thank you so much for all your support, dear readers! I'm still uploading side stories for this work on *Let's Be Novelists* too, so if you're interested, please enjoy those as well.

Someone making
food and crying

Thanks to the Tsugirano
2021 awards and for
your continued support!

ナダレ 高嶺ナレ
NADARE TAKAMINE





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